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SPEEDING SLOWNESS: NEO-MODERN CONTEMPLATIVE AND SUBLIME CINEMA AESTHETICS IN GODFREY REGGIO'S QATSI TRILOGY

Abstract: The article analyzes the various ways in which Godfrey Reggio's experimental documentary films, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), tend to incorporate narrative and visual conventions traditionally associated with neo-modern aesthetics of slow and sublime cinema. The former concept, defined as a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema" (Romney 2010) and characterized by the frequent use of "long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (Flanagan 2008), is often seen as a creative evolution of Schrader's transcendental style or, more generally, neo-modernist trends in contemporary cinematography. Although predominantly analyzed through the lens of some common stylistic tropes of the genre's mainstream works, its scope and framework has been recently broadened to encompass post-1960 experimental and avant-garde as well as realistic documentary films, which often emphasize contemplative rather than slow aspects of the projected scenes (Tuttle 2012). Taking this as a point of departure, I argue that the *Qatsi* trilogy, despite being classified as largely atypical slow films, relies on a set of conventions which draw both on the stylistic excess of non-verbal sublime cinema (Thompson 1977; Bagatavicius 2015) and on some formal devices of contemplative cinema, including slowness, duration, anti-narrative or Bazinian Realism. In particular, the images' evocative oscillation between nostalgic neo-modernist natural and technological sublime might stem from its employment of extended shot duration subjected to slow motion as well as panoramic, accelerated and long panning shots enhanced by the atmospheric scores of Philip Glass.

Keywords: American experimental documentary film, neo-modern aesthetics, slow and contemplative cinema, sublime cinema, Godfrey Reggio, *Qatsi* Trilogy.

In this article I present and analyze the various ways in which Godfrey Reggio's experimental documentary films, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982),¹ *Powaqqatsi* (1988)² and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002),³ tend to incorporate the narrative and visual conventions traditionally associated with the neo-modern aesthetics of sublime and slow cinema. The latter concept, defined as a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema"⁴ and characterized by the frequent use of "long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday",⁵ is often seen as a creative evolution of Schrader's transcendental style⁶ or, more generally, neo-modernist trends in contemporary cinematography.⁷ Although predominantly analyzed through the lens of some common stylistic tropes of the genre's mainstream works, including those of Tarkovsky, Bergman, Bresson, Antonioni, or Sokurov, its scope and framework has been recently broadened to encompass post-1960 experimental and avant-garde as well as realistic documentary films,⁸ which often emphasize contemplative rather than slow aspects of the projected scenes.⁹ Taking this as a point of departure, I argue that Reggio's *Qatsi* Trilogy, despite being classified as largely atypical slow films,¹⁰ relies on a set of conventions which draw both on the stylistic excess of non-verbal sublime cinema¹¹ and on some formal devices of contemplative cinema, including slowness, duration, anti-narrative or Bazinian Realism.¹² In particular, the images' evocative oscillation between nostalgic neo-modernist natural and technological sublime¹³ might stem from its employ-

¹ *Koyaanisqatsi*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (1982; Beverly Hills: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

² *Powaqqatsi*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (1988; Beverly Hills: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

³ *Naqoyqatsi*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (2002; Santa Monica: Miramax, 2002), DVD.

⁴ J. Romney, "In Search of Lost Time", *Sight & Sound* 2010, vol. 20, no 2, pp. 43-44.

⁵ M. Flanagan, "Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema", *I6:9* vol. 6, no 20 /2008. Online at http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11_inenglish.htm; accessed 20 June 2016.

⁶ P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1972.

⁷ see e.g. R. Syska, *Filmowy Neomodernizm*, Avalon, Kraków 2014.

⁸ M. Flanagan, 'Slow Cinema': *Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film* (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2012).

⁹ H. Tuttle, May 12, 2010, "Slow Films, Easy Life (Sight&Sound)," *Unspoken Cinema*, June 20, 2016, <http://unspokencinema.blogspot.com/2010/05/slow-films-easy-life-sight.html>.

¹⁰ O.E. Çağlayan, *Screening Boredom: The History and Aesthetics of Slow Cinema* (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2014), p. 243.

¹¹ see e.g. K. Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess", *Ciné-Tracts* 1977, vol. 1, no. 2; A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema: Experiential Excess and Embodied Spectatorship in Godfrey Reggio's Qatsi Trilogy* (MA thesis, The University of British Columbia, 2015).

¹² A. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", *Film Quarterly* 1960, vol. 13, no 4, pp. 4-9.

¹³ D.E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1994.

ment of extended shot duration subjected to slow motion as well as panoramic, accelerated travelling and long panning shots enhanced by the highly atmospheric scores of Philip Glass. These and related tropes not only reinforce the recurring existential concerns of Reggio's experimental films, which center around the destructive impact of urban life and technology on nature, but also tend to evoke a range of emotional states, such as an intensified sense of temporality, boredom, contemplation, awe, and terror, hence coming close to neo-modern slowness and sublimity.¹⁴

Although Godfrey Reggio's *Qatsi* Trilogy has been little explored in scholarly terms, it is widely believed to have broken new ground for postmodern documentary film due to its unprecedented aesthetic and emotional appeal. The three productions, *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi* and *Naqoyqatsi*, labeled as Cinéma Pur (Pure Cinema),¹⁵ have not only proved to be revolutionary and timeless in both its form and content, but they also continue to serve as a remarkable example of meaningful avant-garde works, providing a highly immersive cinematic experience with a message.¹⁶ In Reggio's experimental pictures, the message is clearly environmentally- or New Age-oriented¹⁷ and constitutes a still relevant comment on contemporary (post)industrial civilization. Solomon argues further that the films, especially *Koyaanisqatsi*, can be considered "a postmodern parody of traditional film documentaries" or "a postmodern denunciation of the culture of postmodernism" through its skillful use of non-narrative structure and a highly diversified range of juxtaposed imagery enhanced by Philip Glass's synthesized score.¹⁸ The effect seems to be additionally reinforced by Reggio's reliance on a set of conventions characteristic for non-verbal sublime and contemplative cinema aesthetics, such as stylistic excess, natural and technological sublime, slowness, duration, anti-narrative or Bazinian

¹⁴ J. Orr, *Cinema and Modernity*. Polity Press, Cambridge 1993.

¹⁵ The term is usually applied to experimental cinematic works produced within the 1920s European avant-garde movement and characterized by opposing any form of narrative expression and advocating an employment of some unique visual and rhythmic editing techniques, such as time lapse, slow motion, dynamic cutting, trick and moving camera shots, etc. See R. Clair, "Cinéma pur et cinéma commercial", *Cahiers du mois* 1925, vol. 16/17, pp. 89-90; F.E. Beaver, *Dictionary of Film Terms: The Aesthetic Companion to Film Art*, Peter Lang, New York 2006, pp. 39-40.

¹⁶ M. Dempsey, "Qatsi Means Life: The Films of Godfrey Reggio", *Film Quarterly* 1989, vol. 42, no. 3, p. 2; J. Solomon, "Our decentered culture: The postmodern worldview", in: *The Postmodern Presence: Readings on Postmodernism in American Culture and Society*, ed. A.A. Berger, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek 1998, p. 38.

¹⁷ see e.g. G. Stephens, "Koyaanisqatsi and the Visual Narrative of Environmental Film", *Screening the Past* 2010, vol. 28. Online at <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthe-past/28/koyaanisqatsi-visual-narrative-of-environmental-film.html>, accessed 21 June 2016.

¹⁸ J. Solomon, *Our decentered culture...*, p. 37.

Realism. Hence, it might be inferred that the films' constant oscillation between neo-modern slowness and sublimity as well as their purposeful depiction of highly contrasting, discontinuous, disharmonious and disconcerting scenes, tend to contribute to their ongoing popularity and their worldwide appreciation as cult classics. Particularly *Koyaanisqatsi* was critically acclaimed and selected for preservation in the National Film Registry in 2000 as being "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant".¹⁹

When the first and best known installment of the trilogy, *Koyaanisqatsi*, premiered in 1983, the name of Godfrey Reggio was mostly unheard of among the film audiences and critics. Before that time, he had no experience of film-making and, what is more, he had little opportunity to actually watch and analyze any cinematic works. Reggio was brought up in a distinguished and devoutly Catholic family in New Orleans, Louisiana, and at the age of fourteen he joined the Roman Catholic Congregation of Christian Brothers, where he spent another fourteen years leading an ascetic lifestyle and training to become a monk.²⁰ As he recalls:

I lived in the Middle Ages ... I was in a very strict, ascetic community and was practicing asceticism at 14. It made a tremendous impression on me. It also made me very crazy, because ... [the monks, who] were basically Calvinists, actually believed that the body was evil ... I had to have my head shaved, and I lived a very strict life of silence and manual labour and study from the age of 14 until 23; then I was more out in the world but still with vows and a member of the community ... I took it all very seriously. I wanted to be a saint, like you're supposed to want to be ... I collected holy cards, not baseball cards.²¹

In the 1960s and 1970s, Reggio became involved in social work with Chicano street gangs, particularly in New Mexico's poverty stricken barrios; one of his greatest accomplishments include co-funding La Clinica de la Gente, Young Citizens for Action and the Institute for Regional Education, all established in Santa Fe. In the early 1970s, he also contributed to the development of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico by designing and organizing

¹⁹ "Complete National Film Registry Listing," Library of Congress, accessed June 22, 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/index-of-essays>.

²⁰ S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1992, p. 381; P. W. Vivier, "The Postmodern Aspects Reflected in the Qatsi Trilogy" (MA thesis, Tshwane University of Technology, 2010), p. 55.

²¹ M. Dempsey, *Qatsi Means Life...*, p. 2.

numerous media campaigns, where he successfully protested against the surveillance and promoted some post-Vietnam issues, such as the right to privacy. However, it was Reggio's disillusionment with the Congregation's hyper-conservative nature that finally led him to leave the monastery and turn to non-mainstream filmmaking.²² Both Luis Buñuel's *Los olvidados* (1950) and Artavazd Peleshyan's *Vremena goda* (1975),²³ particularly the former's realistic portrayal of the impoverished children of Mexico City in the tradition of social realism and surrealism, are widely regarded as the director's first profound and life-altering cinematic experiences, which have exerted an everlasting influence over his working style and helped him choose a non-narrative and non-verbal experimental documentary film as the major form of artistic expression.²⁴

Reggio's first work, *Koyaanisqatsi*, which took seven years to shoot, is usually described as "a feature-length montage juxtaposing the pristine beauty of unspoiled nature with the more ambiguous 'terrible' beauty of humanity and its creations".²⁵ The film was released only due to the efforts of Francis Ford Coppola, who was so impressed with the screening during its post-production period that he proposed to add his name to the credits and thus helped it to gain wider distribution and media attention, which eventually enabled the film to achieve an unexpected critical and commercial success. Commonly believed to be a revolutionary work within its own genre, *Koyaanisqatsi* presents a series of natural and urban landscapes, scored by Glass's mesmerizing compositions, with the aim of questioning the relationship between nature, technology and the consumerism of the American society. As poetically put by Dempsey, the documentary begins with

a slipstream of landscape images all but hallucinatory in their pellucid, unpopulated clarity (...). Then comes a cascade of pollution, freneticness, and soul-annihilating regimentation inflicted on the planet in the name of civilization, progress, and modernity. Reggio and his collaborators portray Earth as a living creature slowly being poisoned by its perversely suicidal passengers – as if in imitation of the scorpion that stings the frog carrying it across the river in Orson Welles's *Mr. Arkadin*.²⁶

²² Ibidem.

²³ *Los olvidados*, directed by Luis Buñuel (1950; Mexico: Ultramar Films, 2004), DVD; *Vremena goda*, directed by Artavazd Peleshyan (1975; Yerevan: Yerevan Film Studio).

²⁴ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 19; M. Dempsey, *Qatsi Means Life...*, p. 2; S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2...*, p. 381.

²⁵ M. Dempsey, *Qatsi Means Life...*, p. 2.

²⁶ Ibidem.

As it continues making forays into environmentalism-related concerns, the film exposes its audiences to some striking, evocative and contemplative imagery of awe-inspiring wilderness and state-of-the-art technology, including nuclear test sites, oil fields, traffic patterns, processed food factories, skyscrapers or a rocket lifting off. Reggio's moral message, centered around the destructive impact of the latter on the natural world, is clearly implied in the epilogue, which shows the translation of the titular word from the Hopi language ("1. Crazy life. 2. Life in turmoil. 3. Life out of balance. 4. Life disintegrating. 5. A state of life that calls for another way of living.") as well as "the translation of the Hopi Prophecies sung in the film".²⁷

Meanwhile, the second installment of the trilogy, *Powaqqatsi: Life in Transformation*, focuses exclusively on the developing nations of the Southern Hemisphere, such as Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Nepal, Egypt, Brazil or Peru, and a vivid depiction of the conflict between the traditional ways of living and those imposed by rapid industrialization.

The central theme of progress and change is additionally enhanced by a number of natural shots as well as representations of everyday activities, including cultural and religious practices of the Third World nations. However, despite its original format and meditative quality reminiscent of its predecessor, the picture received average reviews from the critics and quickly disappeared from theatres after a brief run. Similarly, *Naqoyqatsi: Life as War* (2002), the final chapter of the trilogy, which came out nearly two decades later, has not proved to be successful and today is widely considered the weakest of Reggio's cult classics. While presenting the transformation of the natural world into a digital one and its detrimental impact on humanity, the picture utilizes a range of representational strategies through its adoption of computer-generated imagery as well as manipulated archive footage and stock images.²⁸ For this reason, the process of making the film, defined as virtual cinema on the DVD extras, has been criticized as largely lacking a metaphorical resonance or poetic and spiritual traits. As observed by Bagatavicius,

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

²⁷ *Koyaanisqatsi*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (1982; Beverly Hills: Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 2002), DVD.

²⁸ P. Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005, p. 15.

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.²⁹

Although differing in the use of imagery as well as optical and digital techniques and often criticized for containing trite or simplistic messages and clichés, both *Powaqqatsi* and *Naqoyqatsi* continue the tradition of *Koyaanisqatsi*, namely that of an experimental documentary with no vocalized narration. As explained by Reggio himself, this extremely non-narrative form has been implemented with a specific ideological purpose: “It’s not for lack of love of the language that these films have no words. It’s because, from my point of view, our language is in a state of vast humiliation. It no longer describes the world in which we live”.³⁰ The lack of dialogue, however, is successfully compensated by an almost hypnotizing juxtaposition of images and music, which has laid foundations for Reggio’s peculiar genre, often considered a revitalization of the city symphony:

Like many of the city symphonies, the film’s structure suggests the passage of a day, from dawn to night, beginning with largely rural images and then progressing to urban ones. Or it could be a creation myth, starting from fire, progressing to deserts, then water and cultivation, to technology. Gradually, inevitably, the film turns into a condemnation of our technological society.³¹

In terms of some generic categorizations, while Good, Godfrey and Goodall refer to Reggio’s works as “the spiritual documentary film”,³² McDonald classifies them as belonging to avant-doc cinema.³³ However, as mentioned above, it might be hypothesized that the analyzed feature-length documentary films have derived primarily and specifically from the city symphony, an experimental style of documentary, which immortalized a complex spatial arrangement of urban environments through its reliance on kinaesthetic visual

²⁹ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 61.

³⁰ *Essence of Life*, directed by Greg Carson (2002; Beverly Hills: MGM Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

³¹ D. Eagan, *America’s Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry*, Continuum, New York 2010, p. 779.

³² M. Goodall, J. Good, and W. Godfrey, *Film and representation: Three readings*, in: *Crash Cinema: Representation in Film*, eds. M. Goodall, J. Good, and W. Godfrey, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle: 2007, p. xix.

³³ S. MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

modes or rhythmic editing.³⁴ Some classic examples representative of the genre, including Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta*, Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Mannus Franken and Joris Ivens's *Rain* or Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera*,³⁵ constituted silent feature-length montage of lively shots and close-ups of urban spaces and their residents engaged in everyday activities. Although the city symphony turned out to be a rather short-lived form of documentary, which experienced a brief reemergence in the 1930s and 1940s with Ralph Steiner's *The City* and Arne Sucksdorff's *Rhythm of a City*,³⁶ its sensory aesthetics and focus on vast symbolic landscapes was later evidenced in Terrence Malick's, Michelangelo Antonioni's or Stanley Kubrick's works and, as pointed out by Bagatavicius, rejuvenated in Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*.³⁷ In particular, it may be argued that some formal techniques characteristic for the genre, such as hyperkinetic camera choreography, speeded up sequences or time lapse photography, resurfaced in *Qatsi*, seen as the modern city symphony and founded on certain principles of both sublime and contemplative slowness.

The aesthetics of slow cinema, defined a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema"³⁸ and characterized by a frequent use of "long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday",³⁹ is often perceived as a creative evolution of Schrader's transcendental style⁴⁰ or, more generally, neo-modernist trends in contemporary cinematography.⁴¹ The former notion, coined in Schrader's landmark work *Transcendental Style in Film*⁴² and evident in the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, Roberto Rossellini and Budd Boetticher, is manifested in the spiritual quality achieved through the lack of editorial comment or editing, austere camerawork, and acting devoid of self-consciousness. In the light of

³⁴ K. Beattie, *From City Symphony to Global City Film: Documentary Display and the Corporeal*, "Screening the Past" 2006, vol. 20, p. 1.

³⁵ *Manhatta*, directed by Charles Sheeler, and Paul Strand (1921; Hollywood: Image Entertainment, 2005), DVD; *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, directed by Walter Ruttmann (1927; Berlin: Deutsche Vereins-Film, 2008), DVD; *Rain*, directed by Mannus Franken and Joris Ivens (1929; Amsterdam: Capi-Holland, 2002), VHS; *Man with the Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov (1929; Kyiv: VUFKU, 2009), DVD.

³⁶ *The City*, directed by Ralph Steiner (1939; San Francisco: American Documentary Films Inc., 2007), DVD; *Rhythm of a City*, directed by Arne Sucksdorff (1947; Stockholm: Swedish Tourist Traffic Association).

³⁷ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 2.

³⁸ J. Romney, *In Search of Lost...*, p. 43.

³⁹ M. Flanagan, *Towards an Aesthetic...*

⁴⁰ P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film...*

⁴¹ R. Syska, *Filmowy Neomodernizm...*

⁴² P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film...*

film criticism, however, rather than formulating a precise working definition of the proposed concept, Schrader provides his readers with a largely ambiguous, arbitrary and subjective description, with little potential for film analysis:

Transcendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence; it eschews all conventional interpretations of reality: realism, naturalism, psychologism, romanticism, expressionism, impressionism, and, finally, rationalism. (...) In motion pictures these constructs take the form of what Robert Bresson has called 'screens', clues or study guides which help the viewer 'understand' the event: plot, acting, characterization, camerawork, music, dialogue, editing. In films of transcendental style these elements are, in popular terms, 'nonexpressive' (that is they are not expressive of culture or personality); they are reduced to stasis. Transcendental style stylizes reality by eliminating (or nearly eliminating) those elements which are primarily expressive of human experience, thereby robbing the conventional interpretations of reality of their relevance and power. Transcendental style, like the mass, transforms experience into a repeatable ritual which can be repeatedly transcended".⁴³

On the other hand, it seems that despite its weaknesses, Schrader's study of transcendental aesthetics has made quite a significant contribution to the development of slow cinema, seen as a distinctive genre of filmmaking. It has also given rise to some other transcendence-related theories, including Bird's spiritual realism, "in which cinema's technical properties become the vehicle of meditation",⁴⁴ or Sobchack's analysis of cinematic experiences from a phenomenological-existentialist perspective.⁴⁵ More importantly, however, it has fostered a broader academic discussion on the ways in which slow cinema tends to evoke the transcendental style and a contemplative register through the use of stylized editing patterns characteristic for the new wave of the 1960s and beyond.

The term 'slow cinema' was first coined by the film critic Jonathan Romney as late as 2010 with the aim of defining a trend within art cinema that surfaced as a distinctive genre of filmmaking during the 2000s. In the *Sight and Sound* article, Romney describes this tendency as a "varied strain of austere minimalist cinema that has thrived internationally over the past ten years", which

⁴³ P. Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film...*, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁴ M. Bird, *Film as hierophany*, in: *Religion in Film*, eds. J. R. May, and M. Bird, The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, Tennessee 1982, p. 15.

⁴⁵ V. Sobchack, *Carnal of Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California 2004.

“downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality”.⁴⁶ Originally, the core assumptions of slow cinema were theorized in reference to some contemporary auteurs, including Béla Tarr, Lisandro Alonso, Gus Van Sant, Tsai Ming-liang, Pedro Costa or Albert Serra, whose works were characterized by reduced narrative structures, aesthetics of emptiness, or the focus on symbolic landscapes. Quandt contributes to the debate by enumerating particular aesthetic properties that have been long associated with the genre:

adagio rhythms and oblique narrative; a tone of quietude and reticence, an aura of unexplained or unearned anguish; attenuated takes, long tracking or panning shots, often of depopulated landscapes; prolonged hand-held follow shots of solo people walking; slow dollies to a window or open door framing nature; a materialist sound design; and a preponderance of Tarkovskian imagery.⁴⁷

Undoubtedly, both Romney and Quandt emphasize slowness as the most crucial descriptive factor, which, akin to the larger Slow Movement, deliberately opposes the majority of mainstream, fast-paced and commercial cinema productions. Meanwhile, a more elaborate discussion on “an aesthetic of slow” was fostered in Flanagan’s PhD thesis,⁴⁸ which provided a considerably accurate and detailed description of the history and some major stylistic traits of the films classified as closely related or belonging to the genre. The dissertation, which can be considered the first manuscript-length academic study of slow cinema, does not only attempt to reframe this cinematic trend in a much broader cultural context by encompassing various works of endurance art and experimental film, but it also questions the use of the label ‘slow’ in reference to the analyzed phenomena: “As a collective term, ‘slow’ too readily suggests a binary opposition based on speed and motion, and signifies a range of contemporary films, filmmakers, and styles in a manner that might be considered to be excessively panoptic”.⁴⁹ Throughout the whole work, however, Flanagan retains the term ‘slow cinema’ as “the most fitting container”, which has “become commonly accepted as a broad signifier of a certain mode of durational art and experimental film” and successfully accounts for “the complex network

⁴⁶ J. Romney, *In Search of Lost...*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ J. Quandt, *The sandwich process: Simon Field talks about polemics and poetry at film festivals*, in: *Dekalog 3: On Film Festivals*, ed. R. Porton, Wallflower Press, London 2009, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁸ M. Flanagan, “‘Slow Cinema’...”.

⁴⁹ M. Flanagan, “‘Slow Cinema’...”, p. 5.

of stylistic convergences referred to here with absolute precision”.⁵⁰ Flanagan encapsulates the major characteristics of the genre as follows:

The label ‘slow cinema’ refers to a model of art or experimental film that possesses a set of distinct characteristics: an emphasis upon extended duration (in both formal and thematic aspects); an audio-visual depiction of stillness and everydayness; the employment of the long take as a structural device; a slow or undramatic form of narration (if narrative is present at all); and a predominantly realist (or hyperrealist) mode or intent.⁵¹

Not surprisingly, the somewhat ambiguous nature of the aforementioned terminology has provoked a critical response from the blogger Harry Tuttle, who considered the epithet ‘slow’ insufficient or even redundant and suggested that it should be replaced with ‘contemplative’.⁵² Despite Tuttle’s use of a largely colloquial rhetoric inconsistent with the widely established instruments of film criticism, some of his arguments are to some extent beneficial in theorizing the key features of the genre. Çağlayan distinguishes between the two labels and investigates the ways in which they can be adopted in film analysis:

The label contemplative rightly designates the central aspects of contemporary Slow Cinema, such as its aesthetic experience and mode of address. (...) much of Slow Cinema hinges on a negotiation between the spectator and the film in pursuit of a narrative meaning, motivation and/or resolution. While the films deliberately avoid and reduce narrative action, contemplation becomes the meaning-seeking process by which spectators can critically engage with the films. However, contemplative as a label overlooks the fact that contemplation in cinema is not wholly specific to Slow Cinema; in other words, many mainstream films outside the Slow Cinema circle invite their spectators to contemplate a topic or a subject by way of graphic provocation, witty dialogue or other means. What separates Slow Cinema from these films is their perpetual stillness and monotony; in other words, Slow Cinema is generally characterized by a persistent approach to the reductive manipulation of temporality and pacing, hence the label ‘slow’.⁵³

Therefore, despite their descriptive vagueness and ambiguity, both terms, often used interchangeably, seem to be complimentary and should not be excluded

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ M. Flanagan, “‘Slow Cinema’...”, p. 5.

⁵² H. Tuttle, May 12, 2010, “Slow Films, Easy Life...”

⁵³ O.E. Çağlayan, “Screening Boredom”..., p. 8.

from the academic study of the films categorized as belonging to the framework of slow cinema. As pointed out by Flanagan, whatever label one chooses to use in their research, it is intended to denote the kind of cinema that shares “an emphasis on the passage of time in the shot, an undramatic narrative or non-narrative mode, and a rigorous compositional form that is designed for contemplative spectatorial practice”.⁵⁴

As suggested before, although predominantly analyzed through the lens of some common aesthetic traits of slow cinema’s mainstream works, the scope and framework of the genre has been recently broadened to encompass post-1960 experimental and avant-garde as well as realistic documentary films, which often emphasize both the contemplative and the slow aspects of the projected scenes and motives.⁵⁵ The trend toward slowness emerged in the postwar art and cinema, which either explicitly or implicitly resisted the dominant capitalism-driven ideologies of the mainstream culture, including cinema, mass media or saturation advertising still prevailing in European and North American countries.⁵⁶ Company points out that a new sense of temporality was soon adopted in some landmark works of Roberto Rossellini, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Aleksandr Sokurov, and other important filmmakers.⁵⁷ A wide array of slow cinema conventions employed in those and related films did not only challenge the two-second average shot length of many Hollywood productions, but they also contributed to some representative canons of art cinema, originally proposed in Bordwell’s *Film Art*⁵⁸ and Neale’s *Art Cinema as Institution*.⁵⁹ While the former defines an art film as a realist picture incorporating elements of documentary realism as well as resisting the narrative mode and the cause-effect sequence of events,⁶⁰ the latter contends that cinema developed as an institution in response to classical Hollywood exports and their dominance in international exhibition markets during the silent era and beyond. Such representational modes, particularly leaning toward documentary realism and slowness, have been widely adopted in experimental film since the late 1940s. De Luca notes that a tendency toward realism in contemporary art cinema “is steeped in the hyperbolic application of the long take, which promotes a contemplative viewing experience anchored in materiality and

⁵⁴ M. Flanagan, “‘Slow Cinema’...”, p. 5.

⁵⁵ see e.g. M. Flanagan, “‘Slow Cinema’...”; H. Tuttle, May 12, 2010, “Slow Films, Easy Life...”

⁵⁶ D. Company, “When to be fast? When to be slow?”, in: *The Cinematic*, ed. D. Company, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2007, p. 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁸ D. Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Longman Higher Education, London 1979.

⁵⁹ S. Neale, “Art Cinema as Institution”, *Screen* 1981, vol. 22, no 1.

⁶⁰ D. Bordwell, *Film Art...*, pp. 57-58.

duration” and allows the spectators to “adopt the point of view of the camera and protractedly study images as they appear on the screen in their unexplained literalness”.⁶¹ On the other hand, while contemporary experimental documentary films tend to rely on a range of aesthetic principles traditionally associated with Bazinian realism, they are also likely to present an exaggerated and often deliberately distorted perception of reality. Some influential works representative of this trend include Roberto Rossellini’s *Germania anno zero*, Luchino Visconti’s *La Terra Trema*, Andy Warhol’s *Kiss or Empire*, Larry Gottheim’s *Fog Line*, Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale*, Robert Fenz’s *Forest of Bliss*, Peter Hutton’s *New York Portrait: Chapter I or Study of a River*, James Benning’s *One Way Boogie Woogie or Los*⁶² and many others.

According to Bordwell, the majority of the conventions employed in art and slow cinema clearly oppose some popular Hollywood devices by relying on the two distinctive principles, namely documentary and sensory realism, seen in its exposure of real life locations and problems as well as psychologically complex characters, authorial expressivity and ambiguity, often manifested in the use of open-ended narrative or pensive ending. Furthermore, Bordwell notes that although slow cinema quite evidently favours stylistic innovation over the actual plot, it also shares a number of characteristics with art cinema, including deep focus cinematography, ambiguous and casual narrative structures, long takes or reserved modes of storytelling.⁶³ Meanwhile, Flanagan analyzes this categorization further by indicating that the boundaries between art film, “non-narrative experimentation” and documentary can be deemed confounding and hybridized.⁶⁴ In his study, Flanagan quotes Mulvey⁶⁵ as one of the leading scholars focusing on the relationship between narrativity and avant-garde as well as experimental film operating within the framework of slow cinema:

61 T. de Luca, “Realism of the senses: A tendency in contemporary world cinema”, in: *Theorizing World Cinema*, eds. L. Nagib, R. Dudrah, and Ch. Periam, I.B.Tauris, London 2012, pp. 183, 193.

62 *Germania anno zero*, directed by Roberto Rossellini (1948; Rome: Tevere Film); *La Terra Trema*, directed by Luchino Visconti (1948; Rome: Universal Film, 2002), DVD; *Kiss*, directed by Andy Warhol (1963; New York: Andy Warhol Films, 2004), DVD; *Empire*, directed by Andy Warhol (1964; New York: Andy Warhol Films, 2004), DVD; *Fog Line*, directed by Larry Gottheim (1970); *La Région Centrale*, directed by Michael Snow (1972); *Forest of Bliss*, directed by Robert Fenz (1986); *New York Portrait: Chapter I*, directed by Peter Hutton (1979); *Study of a River*, directed by Peter Hutton (1997); *One Way Boogie Woogie*, directed by James Benning (1977); *Los*, directed by James Benning (2001).

63 D. Bordwell, *Film Art...*, pp. 57-58.

64 M. Flanagan, “‘Slow Cinema’...”, p. 26.

65 L. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. Reaktion Books, London: 2006.

As Laura Mulvey has suggested in the context of cinema's convergence with new media, the films that comprise slow cinema aim to locate new ways of responding to the world by seeking to 'derive images from whatever the camera observed rather than a narrative aspiration to order and organisation'. Mulvey describes this approach as pertaining to a 'cinema of record, observation and delay', in which gaps created by the decline of action are filled by 'empty images of landscapes or cityscapes' and elongated shots that enable 'the presence of time to appear on the screen' (Mulvey 2006: 129). In this type of cinema, 'the oppositions between narrative and avant-garde film, between materialism and illusion, have become less distinct, and the uncertain relation between movement and stillness, and between halted time and time in duration, is now more generally apparent' (Mulvey 2006: 30). Such a slackening of divisions between narrativity and the avant-garde (that is, between action and delay), produces a conspicuous fluidity between divergent modes of representation.⁶⁶

Not surprisingly, the *Qatsi* trilogy, classified as a non-narrative experimental documentary, which draws on a set of generic tropes related to the city symphony, tends to incorporate the ambivalence of the aforementioned oppositions and divisions. In this context, it is also worth mentioning a rather problematic distinction between art cinema, which, while drawing on concepts from modernism, aims to "pose questions that guide us in fitting material into an ongoing structure", and non-narrative experimental film, which operates entirely outside the classical film.⁶⁷ Although the general category of experimental film is often perceived as synonymous with avant-garde and underground film, the former, as suggested by Flanagan, "tends to alight upon singular events (in isolation, series or superimposition) rather than narratives, and its explicit function is to interrogate both the filmic apparatus and the spectator's perception of those events".⁶⁸ Therefore, in contrast to avant-garde cinema, experimental cinema is likely to consolidate disparate structural and realist works of Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, James Benning or Peter Hutton. Specifically, non-narrative experimental filmmakers working in the realist mode, for instance, have sought inspiration from the early films of the Lumière brothers and, as a result, combined an "extremely reductive strategy" (as put by Hutton),⁶⁹ with uncomplicated observational practice.⁷⁰ Flanagan argues that these and related

⁶⁶ M. Flanagan, "'Slow Cinema'...", pp. 26-27.

⁶⁷ D. Bordwell, *Film Art...*, p. 210.

⁶⁸ M. Flanagan, "'Slow Cinema'...", p. 42.

⁶⁹ S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3. Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1997, p. 246, 244, 247.

⁷⁰ P. Gidal, *Theory and definition of structural/materialist film*, in: *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. P. Gidal, BFI, London 1978, p. 3.

works of contemporary observational cinema are closely based on the representational modes of structural film, primarily the fixed frame and the extended duration, and tend to convey a largely unmediated or sometimes uninterrupted representation of reality. Similarly, it may be argued that Reggio's trilogy, while revisiting some visual tropes of slow cinema, exemplifies the tradition of both the city symphony and the structural film, defined as an experimental form of cinema in which "the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified" and whose content is "minimal and subsidiary to the outline" so that the spectators are offered few or no distractions or deviations.⁷¹ For example, Hutton's famous city and landscape portraits, including *Budapest*, *Lodz Symphony*, *Landscape for Manon*, *In Titan's Goblet*, *Two Rivers*, *At Sea*⁷² or the aforementioned documentaries, can be seen as representing both genres. Particularly the latter series provides its audiences with highly contemplative, sublime and luminist images constructed by means of observational strategy, which seems to be central to the evolution of slow cinema.⁷³

Similarly, Reggio's non-verbal formula appears to rely on selected structural film and slow cinema conventions pioneered by experimental filmmakers engaged in creating unforgettable city and landscape portraiture, including Ruttmann, Warhol, Gottheim, Snow, Rimmer, Fenz, Benning, Hutton and other influential artists. Naturally, the primary cinematic effects, which tend to accentuate the contemplative aspects of the captured footage, are slow motion and superimpositions utilized abundantly in an attempt "not to romanticize the subject, but to monumentalize it so that we could look at it from a different point of view".⁷⁴ In his interview with McDonald, Reggio explains that recording at a rate of between 36 and 129 frames per second was particularly crucial in the case of *Powaqqatsi*, where "we're looking at a world that is intrinsically slow, that lives with the rhythms of nature, that is diversified, that is the opposite of the high kinetic energy of the industrial world".⁷⁵ He also points to his major motivation behind the use of this specific device: "In *Powaqqatsi*, the intention was to create a mosaic, a monument, a frozen moment of the simultaneity of

⁷¹ P. Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p. 348.

⁷² *Budapest*, directed by Peter Hutton (1984-1986); *Lodz Symphony*, directed by Peter Hutton (1991-1993); *Landscape for Manon*, directed by Peter Hutton (1987); *In Titan's Goblet*, directed by Peter Hutton (1991); *Two Rivers*, directed by Peter Hutton (2002); *At Sea*, directed by Peter Hutton (2007).

⁷³ S. MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2001, pp. 273-288.

⁷⁴ S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2...*, p. 388.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 395.

life as it existed in one instant around the Southern Hemisphere. (...) In both *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Powaqqatsi*, the intention was to see the ordinary from an extraordinary perspective.”⁷⁶ Bagatavicius provides a compelling interpretation of how “Serra Pelada”, the opening of *Powaqqatsi*, capitalizes on slow motion and varied shot types, especially long and aerial shots:

The shot types vary: isolated close ups of exhausted workers looking into or just beyond the lens; medium close ups 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. (...). 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 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. (...) 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”.⁷⁷

A similar aesthetic effect, reinforced by the gradual deceleration of slow motion, is generated in the iconic ending of *Koyaanisqatsi*, showing the 1962 failed launch of the world’s first Atlas-Centaur rocket, Saturn V, which explodes over Cape Canaveral, Florida. Bagatavicius argues that due to its subjection to extreme slow motion and incremental micro-zooms, the image, besides producing the sublime response, “reshapes the viewer’s perspective until a trance-like state emerges from the full volatile arc that this rocket fragment follows”⁷⁸. Specifically, the aforementioned cinematic devices accompanied by long takes and

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 338.

⁷⁷ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, pp. 36-37.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 39.

elapsed shot time might contribute to distorting the spectators' temporal and spatial sensibility, simultaneously serving as a framing device for the whole work's meaningful content.

Some other visual tropes characteristic for slow cinema aesthetics and present in Reggio's trilogy are long tracking and panning shots, sometimes of depopulated landscapes, which appear to draw on numerous principles of documentary and sensory realism. In particular, *Koyaanisqatsi* makes an extensive use of slow tracking shots of natural landscapes and cities, viewed from both high and low angles, which give rise to an almost sensory or somatic relationship between the audience and the projected sequences. For instance, the opening scene of the film, which includes aerial shots of a desolate wilderness with majestic deserts and monumental rock formations, does not only render the viewer an almost omnipotent god-like figure capable of controlling nature, but it also reinforces the effect of the landscape, conjured in a number of the city symphonies. Bagatavicius suggests that, similarly to the latter genre, where the cinematic effectiveness of the landscape is "almost entirely dependent upon the lighting",⁷⁹ Reggio's focus on (symbolic) landscape is also intrinsically interrelated with the director's successful framing of natural phenomena, such as sunshine, mist, rain, fire or a configuration of clouds.⁸⁰ A skillful shot of optical effects, well evidenced in the final segment of *Powaqqatsi*, "From Egypt With Mr. Suso", which contains a mesmerizing take of a body of rippling water, over a minute long, additionally contributes to the sense of documentary and sensory realism, which can be literally absorbed by the audience. It might be further argued that the films' adoption of the long take or full duration within the shot can be considered derivative of Bazin's naive and reductionist notion of film realism, which, while drawing parallels between the indexical function of photography and cinema, favours non-fiction filmmaking seen as an imprint of reality. Although the theory has raised objections from many fellow critics, also known as "Bazin-bashing",⁸¹ Flanagan hypothesizes that Bazin's model of modern cinema may prove to be helpful when analyzing some formal innovations of slow cinema, such as the sequence shot, durational style centered on the long take, the elimination of editing as well as contemplative spectatorial practice: "Slow cinema, then, returns to what we might call the Bazinian root of durational style, displaying a clear acceptance that film adequately registers an impression of the world as it exists in time, and a subjective striving for a realism of duration".⁸² Taking such an assumption, it seems that the *Qatsi*,

⁷⁹ R. Arnheim, *Film as Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California 1957, p. 69.

⁸⁰ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 48.

⁸¹ P. Rosen, *History of Image. Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin*, "Wide Angle" 1987, vol. 9, no 5, pp. 7-34.

⁸² M. Flanagan, "'Slow Cinema'...", p. 98.

although it virtually never attempts an expression of the real sense of time, conveys elements of everyday reality both in a documentary and evocative style, particularly through its use of long panning shots and natural effects. Instead, it tends to deliberately distort and dramatize it, which renders it close to the concept of modernist time⁸³ and aims to amplify the emotional resonance of the imagery. As pointed out by Bagatavicius,

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.⁸⁴

It goes without saying that the focus on landscape in *Qatsi* highlights other characteristics associated with neo-modern slow cinema, such as the aesthetics of emptiness or a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday. Although the latter stylistic traits only occasionally come to the fore in the films' visual content, they are easily detectable on its symbolic and metaphorical level, particularly due to their non-narrative and non-verbal form. Even more importantly, the sense of silence is rarely experienced on the audible level; instead, Philip Glass's elevating score is almost constantly present throughout the films, producing "a trance-like sublime effect", which "matches the mass proliferation and unfathomable quantity of visual units in the films".⁸⁵ In other words, the juxtaposition of images and music, specifically the serialism and rhythmic structures, constitutes a remarkable audiovisual register, which amplifies the visceral transformations of the imagery as well as reinforces its ambiguity. Bagatavicius notes that "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".⁸⁶ According to MacDonald, whether composed by the ensemble in the studio (*Koyaanisqatsi*), a symphonic orchestra featuring a solo cello (*Naqoyqatsi*) or simply assembled

⁸³ R. Syska, *Slow-Czas, Slow-Cinema. Warstwa Temporalna Współczesnego Neomodernizmu*, "Media – Kultura – Komunikacja Społeczna" 2014, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 76.

⁸⁴ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 51.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁸⁶ Ibidem, p. 51.

from various sources of on-site world music (*Powaqqatsi*), Glass's compositions energize the image and are capable of producing a tremendous emotional response in the listener, like the trancelike and highly inspirational Vedic Hindu chants, which "open up the conscious and the unconscious mind to (...) another dimension".⁸⁷ What is more, as mentioned before, both the score and the visual language tend to stress the trilogy's ambiguity. Abundantly employed in art and slow cinema, the films' dependence on the category is clearly reflected in their lack of conventional meaning or clarity; instead, their interpretative potential to a large extent lies in the eye of the beholder. As implied by Reggio himself,

there can be as many meanings – or no meaning – for these films as there are viewers to see them. They strip cinema of its traditional foreground (characterization and plot) and make the background (the context of the story) the new foreground. The intention is to create ineradicable impressions. Einstein said the fish will be the last to know water. Perhaps humans will be the last to know technology – that unseen 'water' in which we swim.⁸⁸

On the other hand, the films' non-narrative and non-verbal form seems to thrive with meaning and, quite paradoxically, the central ideological theme of each installment of the trilogy becomes apparently contextualized. Although often regarded as naive or simplified, *Qatsi* provides its audiences with a rather unambiguous message, which presents "a point-of-view facing the natural world – the technological milieu".⁸⁹ Solomon observes that "through its relentless display of the dehumanizing squalor of modern industrial civilization, the movie makes an eloquent, if unarticulated, plea for another way of living, for a return to preindustrial harmonies".⁹⁰ Interestingly, it is also worth noting that in one of his interviews Reggio insisted that *Koyaanisqatsi*, although it provides some deep insights into the physical and moral condition of contemporary American culture, has no distinctive message and remains open for individual interpretation: "These films are meant to provoke, they are meant to offer an experience rather than an idea or information or a story".⁹¹ Simultaneously, by manipulating the footage, the director offers more attentive viewers a vast array of metaphors, which themselves might serve as a meaningful commentary on the impact of technology on mankind: "Comparing commuters to hot dogs on an

⁸⁷ S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*..., p. 378, 398.

⁸⁸ "The Qatsi Trilogy by Godfrey Reggio and Philip Glass. Director's Note," Pomegranate Arts, accessed July 19, 2016, http://www.pomegranatearts.com/project-philip_glass/pglass_qatsi.html.

⁸⁹ "The Qatsi Trilogy by Godfrey Reggio...

⁹⁰ J. Solomon, *Our decentered culture*..., p. 38.

⁹¹ D. Eagan, *America's Film Legacy*..., p. 779.

assembly line, for example, or tilting up from clogged traffic to a billboard for a resort casino. Reggio holds onto shots until they practically shout ‘metaphor’: bees in a hive, ants on a hill, arterial freeways with cars as corpuscles”.⁹² Moreover, Allen and Goodall, who analyze the framing in *Koyaanisqatsi*, suggest that the film, proposing a number of meta-messages, “reinforces a circularity of life although this circle is uneven and often fractured”.⁹³ According to the scholars, such an interpretation might stem from the fact that the whole picture is opened and closed with largely the same image, which depicts the launch of a NASA rocket rendered in slow motion.⁹⁴

It seems that except for incorporating narrative and visual conventions traditionally associated with slow cinema aesthetics, Reggio’s *Qatsi* is likely to lean toward the concept of neo-modern sublime. Adopting such an assumption, it might be argued that the trilogy relies on a set of cinematic tropes, which draw on stylistic excess,⁹⁵ rooted in the natural and technological sublime.⁹⁶ The tradition of depicting sublime landscapes in American art and culture goes back to the 19th century Hudson River School and its vivid portrayals of the American wilderness, widely exhibited and circulated in the East as well as attracting crowds similarly to today’s popular motion pictures.⁹⁷ The painters’ practices were mostly in accordance with the main principles of American romanticism, which gave rise to the nationwide appreciation of deistic wilderness recognized as one of the principal constituents of national self-esteem.⁹⁸ Therefore, among the most prominent characteristics of the movement was its preoccupation with the notion of romantic landscape, which stands in opposition to the scientific empiricism and secularism of the Western Europe and attempts to rediscover the presence of God and spirituality in nature. The two principal strands which evolved in the course of the school’s development, are pastoral elegy and scientific exoticism, also inseparably connected with visualizing the sublime and the picturesque,⁹⁹ first proposed in 18th century European aesthetics and further discussed by Burke, Kant,

⁹² Ibidem.

⁹³ P. Allen and M. Goodall, “The power of the edge: Multimodal communication, space and framing in *Koyaanisqatsi*”, in: *Crash Cinema: Representation in Film*, eds. M. Goodall, J. Good, and W. Godfrey, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge 2007, p. 38.

⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁹⁵ see e.g. K. Thompson, *The Concept of Cinematic...*; A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*

⁹⁶ D.E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime...*

⁹⁷ C. Carmer, *The Hudson River school. The first New York school*, in: *The Hudson River and Its Painters*, ed. J. K. Howat, Viking Press, New York 1972, pp. 19-24; J. Driscoll, *All that is Glorious Around Us*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1997, pp. 8-20.

⁹⁸ R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut 1982, pp. 67-68.

⁹⁹ J.L. Allen, “Horizons of the Sublime: The Invention of the Romantic West”, *Journal of Historical Geography* 1992, vol. 18, no 1, p. 27.

Schopenhauer or Gilpin. In the American culture, both concepts can be clearly related to Turner's Frontier Thesis, which successfully advanced the myth that pioneering the American West had played a substantial role in shaping the national character, as well as Manifest Destiny, which stresses the U.S. primacy in exploration and expansion across North American territories. The traces of these ideological stances manifest themselves in certain fragments of the trilogy, most notably in *Koyaanisqatsi*'s view of Monument Valley, which might serve as the archetype of the western frontier, a savage wilderness to be both conquered and revered.

Particularly the sublime mode, expressed in a number of the Hudson River School and luminist paintings, which portrayed some overwhelming, unique and often dramatic Wild West settings, evoked the feelings of awe and tranquility as well as uncertainty, fear and terror brought about by visualizing such conditions as vastness, darkness, danger, or solitude. This kind of aesthetics was later adopted in 20th century American cinematic landscapes, which often portrayed an infinite and immense sublime scenery, reducing the viewer to a metaphysical dissolution or a "vanishing nothingness" as well as bringing a sudden realization of an inevitable transience of one's own existence.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Natali suggests that both the Hudson River School and contemporary film depictions of American landscapes tend to share ideological and iconological scenarios associated with "sublime imperial fantasies":

Film landscapes are never purely narrative backgrounds nor simply distracting spectacular settings. They bear the traces of political projects and ideological messages. They press onto viewers' senses, memories, and fears and become part of their memory, carrying the subliminal strength of a past, even archaic, worldview ready to come back as future progress. Like the footprints left on the surface of the moon by U.S. astronauts, Hollywood landscapes bear the footprints of the United States' recurrent manifest destiny.¹⁰¹

The statement, though somewhat simplified, may also serve as a comment on many independent and experimental productions, which often attempt at, as put by McDonald,

revivifying our sense of place in all its complexity – that is, for evoking

¹⁰⁰ A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation. Vol. I*, transl. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., London 1909, p. 266.

¹⁰¹ M. Natali, "The course of the empire: Sublime landscapes in the American cinema", in: *Landscape and Film*, ed. M. Lefebvre, Routledge, London 2006, p. 100.

something of the original discoverers' wonder at where we are, something of the original explorers' excitement in transforming the possible into the actual, and something of the original settlers' understanding of the practical failures of their surround – while at the same time recognizing the problematic moral, environmental, and political implications of five centuries of European involvement in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁰²

Similar emotions may be evoked by the technological sublime, which transferred the sense of “awe and wonder often tinged with an element of terror” from the natural environment to the technological achievements of the industrial revolution.¹⁰³ Originally proposed in Marx's famous work, *The Machine in the Garden*,¹⁰⁴ the concept was ideally supposed to strive for the “middle landscape” by reconciling the machine with the pristine and pastoral wilderness. One of its earliest descriptions, however, was proposed by Charles Caldwell in the 1832 issue of the *New England Magazine*:

Objects of exalted power and grandeur elevate the mind that seriously dwells on them, and impart to it greater compass and strength. Alpine scenery and an embattled ocean deepen contemplation, and give their own sublimity to the conception of beholders. The same will be true of our system of Railroads. Its vastness and magnificence will prove communicable, and add to the standard of the intellect of the country.¹⁰⁵

Some more recent analyses of the technological sublime, the most notable of which include Nye's monograph, define the notion as a distinctively American formation and “an essentially religious feeling, aroused by the confrontation with impressive objects”, which has become one of the “self-justifying parts of a national destiny, just as the natural sublime once undergirded the rhetoric of manifest destiny”.¹⁰⁶ Both Nye and Noble suggest that the concept, seen in a close relation to the sense of national identity, is often indicative of a religious quest for morality, fulfillment, transcendence as well as scientific and spiritual development.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Serres and Latour emphasize the quasi-religious dimension of the human relationship with technology: “Our god is the machine, the technical object, which stresses our mastery of our surroundings”.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² S. MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine...*, p. 91.

¹⁰³ D. E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime...*, p. xvi.

¹⁰⁴ L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1964.

¹⁰⁵ L. Marx, *The Machine in...*, p. 195.

¹⁰⁶ D.E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime...*, pp. 13, 282.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem; D. Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, Penguin, New York 1999.

Unsurprisingly then, the focus on either natural or urban landscape in avant-garde and experimental cinema, often rendered with the sublime sensibility or implying some of the aforementioned ideological messages, can be seen as a rather persistent trend in the history of American filmmaking. Some influential narrative and non-narrative works representative of this tendency include Ralph Steiner's *H2O* (1929), Francis Thompson's *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957), Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street* (1966), Nathaniel Dorsky's two-part *Hours for Jerome* (1966-1970/82), Stan Brakhage's *Desert* (1976), Babette Mangolte's *The Sky on Location* (1982), Michael Rudnick's *Panorama* (1982) and many others.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, the notion of cinematic excess was first proposed in Heath's article, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis"¹¹⁰ and Barthes' essay "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills",¹¹¹ where the scholars discuss the relationship between the materiality of the image and a cinematic work's narrative structures of unity by asserting that the former tends to transcend or go beyond the latter. In other words, both imagery and sound create physical and stylistic structures accompanied by a set of excessive perceptual cues, observable, for example, in the tensions and interplay between plot and story or material and form.¹¹² Meanwhile, Thompson attempts to provide a working definition of excess seen as clearly opposing a film's homogeneity.¹¹³ In her analysis of Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*,¹¹⁴ Thompson claims that excess "implies a gap or lag in motivation" as well as reveals an "underlying arbitrariness of the narrative" and its presence can be detected in the composition of the visual elements, such as static, long and deep focus shots, close-ups, exaggerated style of acting and editing, authentic settings, unclear, problematic

¹⁰⁸ M. Serres, and B. Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1995, p. 141.

¹⁰⁹ *H2O*, directed by Ralph Steiner (1929); *N.Y., N.Y.*, directed by Francis Thompson (1957; Paris: Les Productions Artistes Associés); *Castro Street*, directed by Bruce Baillie (1966; United States: Canyon Cinema); *Hours for Jerome*, directed by Nathaniel Dorsky (1980; United States: Canyon Cinema); *Desert*, directed by Stan Brakhage (1976), *The Sky on Location*, directed by Babette Mangolte (1982), *Panorama*, directed by Michael Rudnick (1982).

¹¹⁰ S. Heath, *Films and System: Terms of Analysis*, "Screen" 1975, vol. 16, no 1.

¹¹¹ R. Barthes, "The third meaning: Research notes on some Eisenstein stills", in: *Image Music Text*, ed. and transl. S. Heath, Fontana Press, London 1977.

¹¹² V. Shklovski, "The Resurrection of the Word", transl. R. Sherwood, "20th Century Studies" 1972, vol. 7-8, p. 46.

¹¹³ K. Thompson, "The Concept of Cinematic Excess", *Ciné-Tracts* 1977, vol. 1, no. 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ivan the Terrible, Part I*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1944; Moscow: Mosfilm, 2001), DVD; *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1958; Moscow: Mosfilm, 2001), DVD.

or indistinct props, etc.¹¹⁵ She concludes that “a perception of a film which includes its excess implies an awareness of the structures (including conventions) at work in the film, since excess is precisely those elements which escape unifying impulses”.¹¹⁶ Although many of the aforementioned elements can be found in Reggio’s trilogy, the essence of cinematic excess lies predominantly in the exposure of omnipresent and proliferating technological and mass culture artifacts.

The concept of sublime cinema itself was coined by Bagatavicius, whose M.A. thesis constitutes the first feature-length manuscript, which “provides a stepping-stone towards the development of a practical working methodology for sublimity that might be applied to (...) non-narrative films”.¹¹⁷ While attempting to formulate a strictly filmic definition of the concept, Bagatavicius distinguishes the following set of salient characteristics, which might be applied to the genre:

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; 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; the sheer ambiguity of the genre.¹¹⁸

In further discussion, Bagatavicius stresses another trait of sublime cinema, which is likely to draw on certain conventions associated with the early cinema of attractions:¹¹⁹

sublime cinema also resuscitates and evolves the universal language and communication of early cinema, as if the cinema of attractions has been caught up on the past hundred years of development, given an adrenaline shot, or rebooted entirely. (...) 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

¹¹⁵ K. Thompson, *The Concept of...*, pp. 57, 62.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 63.

¹¹⁷ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 1.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 22.

¹¹⁹ T. Gunning, *The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*, “Wide Angle” 1986, vol. 8, no 3-4.

this contemporary technological moment and the cinematographic techniques that have developed over the past hundred years.¹²⁰

Basing his research on the aforementioned formal assumptions, Bagatavicius analyzes the various ways in which sublimity, seen as an aesthetic experience and an experiential response of the spectator, is formally generated through special effects, camera movement, and Philip Glass's music, as used throughout *Qatsi*. In other words, the scholar concludes that Reggio's use of slow motion, time lapse, natural effects, digital manipulation and computer generated graphics (CGI), camera movement, as well as score can be regarded as the major factors which render the trilogy a genuinely sublime spectacle.¹²¹ Similarly to the previously discussed slow motion and camera movement, which tend to distort the natural qualities of a projected scene, time lapse sequences, generated with fewer frames in the shot, also disrupt the filmed subject, yet in a strikingly different manner. For example, *Koyaanisqatsi*'s "The Grid", inspired by the avant-garde time lapsed cityscapes of Hilary Harris' *Organism*,¹²² or *Powaqqatsi*'s "From Egypt with Mr. Suso" may illustrate how a sequence of accelerated images convey the velocity of urban life in the city (*Koyaanisqatsi*) or the dichotomy between a motionless rusty car and the speeding, semi-transparent automobiles passing it along the two dirt roads (*Powaqqatsi*). The following fragment is Bagatavicius's interpretation of how the former chapter utilizes time lapse photography in order to invoke a sublime response:

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

¹²⁰ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, p. 24.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*..., p. 24.

¹²² *Organism*, directed by Hilary Harris (1975).

to play again.¹²³

Even more interestingly, “From Egypt with Mr. Suso” provides the spectators with a series of evocative low angle shots, which not only expose a striking contrast between the decayed and the phantom cars, but also symbolize the transient nature of technology and human civilization. Similarly, time lapsed photography used in the two chapters of *Naqoyqatsi* – “Naqoyqatsi” and “The Vivid Unknown”, which feature a starry night captured and (re)presented as dazzling meteor showers, creates a truly sublime spectacle and emphasizes the ambiguity of a manipulated image of the astronomical phenomenon.

The last remark leads to Bagatavicius’ discussion of digital representational strategies and their role in *Qatsi*’s visual and narrative content, particularly in its final installment, *Naqoyqatsi*, in which digital artifacting and 3D-imaging are the most prevalent. As argued by Bagatavicius, the picture “recycles imagery from the other two films and gives them a digital gloss, warps stock footage to suit its collage aesthetic (...) 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”.¹²⁴ Hence, the sublime moments, re-assembled from the previous installments of the trilogy and facilitated through a sensory interaction with the synthetic image, resonate on the metaphorical level of the imagery, embodying an ephemeral nature of the human existence and depersonalization processes in contemporary Western societies. Examples of some computer-generated images, which expose problems and challenges of the post-modern, tech-dominated and violent world, include digitally altered landscapes presenting galloping animals, mushroom clouds from the atomic explosion, “phantom rides” through tunnels, speeding trains and automobiles, astronauts performing EVA, undocking and docking of a spacecraft in space, an x-ray of the human skeleton or a transformation of an outstretched human hand into an elongated alien’s hand. Also, as mentioned above, the soundscape, which remains an inseparable component of the whole trilogy, both conjures and amplifies the sublime and almost palpable experiences by adding momentum to the films’ visual, semantic and emotional content. While analyzing *Koyaanisqatsi*’s “Cloudscape”, Maycock asserts that Glass’ score additionally exposes the rich interpretative potential and the ambiguous nature of Reggio’s evocative images:

If you listen to the music on its own you are not required to imagine clouds

¹²³ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema...*, pp. 44-45.

¹²⁴ Ibidem, p. 54.

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 the artistic decision was.¹²⁵

Similarly, the keyboard textures of *Koyaanisqatsi*'s "Slow People" or its titular chant are capable of intensifying sensuous or almost kinesthetic sensations as well as evoking a sense of physical space while featuring the Hopi Great Gallery pictographs or the demolition and collapse of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis. This hypothesis is somewhat confirmed by Reggio himself, who comments on *Koyaanisqatsi*'s audiovisual content as follows: "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!"¹²⁶ Moreover, Bagatavicius interestingly points out that *Qatsi*'s ability to stimulate some profoundly tactile impressions in the viewers may lay foundations for the so called embodied film spectatorship, also known as haptic visuality.¹²⁷ The concept, located within the cinema of attractions, is usually defined as a sensual experience or a bodily perception of the filmed subject and, as proposed by Sobchack, is founded on the two related concepts – synaesthesia and coenaesthesia.¹²⁸ While the former stands for an involuntary, immediate, concrete and meaningful cinematic experience strictly dependent on the spectator's perception of a diegetic sound as colour, shape, or taste, the latter refers to "the perception of one's whole bodily state as the sum of its somatic perceptions".¹²⁹ Taking such an assumption, it may be argued that the trilogy's excessive audiovisual appeal as well as its experimental and non-narrative format only revivify an active or embodied mode of spectatorship as they invite the audience to garner potent meaning from its ambiguous content rather than impose it on them.

It seems that *Qatsi* makes an extensive use of the footage whose traits not only draw on some salient conventions of sublime cinema, but they also seek inspiration from neo-modern contemplative cinema aesthetics. Despite being classified as largely atypical slow films, the trilogy relies on a set of visual and narrative tropes, based both on the stylistic excess of non-verbal sublime cinema

¹²⁵ R. Maycock, *Glass: A Portrait*, Sanctuary Publishing Limited, London 2002, pp. 41-42.

¹²⁶ S. MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 2*..., p. 396.

¹²⁷ A. Bagatavicius, *Sublime Cinema*..., p. 54.

¹²⁸ L. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina 2000.

¹²⁹ V. Sobchack, *Carnal of Thoughts*..., pp. 67-68.

and on some formal devices of contemplative cinema, including slowness, duration, anti-narrative or Bazinian Realism. In particular, *Qatsi*'s dependence on nostalgic neo-modernism might stem from the use of slow motion and superimpositions, long panning, aerial and panoramic shots, high and low angles, natural effects, documentary and sensory realism as well as their focus on (symbolic) landscape and ambiguous "narrative". Meanwhile, the films' employment of stylistic excess and sublime qualities, rooted in the natural and technological sublime, is additionally conditioned by time lapse photography, digital manipulation and computer generated graphics (CGI), as well as some of the aforementioned aspects of camera movement and score. These and related tropes both reinforce the recurring existential concerns of Reggio's experimental pictures, which center around the destructive impact of urban life and technology on nature, and tend to evoke a range of emotional states, such as an intensified sense of temporality, boredom, contemplation, awe and terror, hence approaching the neo-modern slowness and sublimity.

Although *Koyaanisqatsi* was referred to as "a coffee-table film" and "an overblown non-narrative image piece"¹³⁰ shortly after its release, the film and its sequels have exerted a lasting influence on the mainstream culture and served as an inspiration for various media products and art forms, the most prominent of which include the BBC documentary *The Blue Planet*,¹³¹ Hans Zimmer's score for *Interstellar* (2014)¹³² or Rob Hubbard's soundtrack for the classic video game *Delta*.¹³³ The joint efforts of Reggio's visionary and socio-politically charged directing style, enhanced by Glass's scores and impressive work of some skilled cinematographers and editors, including Ron Fricke, Hilary Harris, Louie Schwartzberg, Graham Berry, Leonidas Zourdoumis, Iris Cahn, Alton Walpole, Russell Lee Fine and Jon Kane, brought the trilogy an unpredicted success and a generally positive critical response. However, this was not only due to the imprimatur of Coppola and the successive screenings at film festivals that *Qatsi*, especially its first installment, made a surprisingly long run at the box office and still cherishes an ongoing popularity among critics and selective audiences. It is also the trilogy's unconventional format, "devoid of any identifiable diegesis" and editorial comments which renders it a still unforgettable and highly captivating cinematic experience engaging the spectators primarily through alternate and visually rich fast and slow motion

¹³⁰ D. Eagan, *America's Film Legacy...*, p. 779.

¹³¹ *The Blue Planet*, produced by Alastair Fothergill (2001; London: BBC Natural History Unit), Television.

¹³² H. Zimmer, *Interstellar: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (2014; New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment), CD.

¹³³ *Delta*, Stavros Fasoulas (Thalamus Ltd, 1987).

shots of natural and urban landscapes.¹³⁴ A plethora of hypnotic, ethereal and lyrical images backed by some ambient circular musical themes help encapsulate Reggio's core message, "denouncing the sterile repetitiveness of modern life", and simultaneously contribute to the films' ambiguity by leaving room for creative interpretation.¹³⁵ Today the trilogy forms part of the larger tradition of experimental filmmaking, continuing the visual and editing strategies of the city symphony as well as the silent and more contemporary non-verbal documentaries, many of which make the National Film Registry. Somewhat surprisingly, Reggio's most recent picture, *Visitors*, released in 2013 and again tackling the question of "humanity's trancelike relationship with technology", has not managed to repeat the success of its predecessors, despite being praised for offering another stunning, wordless, visually sumptuous, graceful and dreamlike experience.¹³⁶ Perhaps however, the future of the avant-doc cinema might bring the world's audiences some new, visceral and even more stimulating projects of this brilliant director.

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¹³⁴ B. Lessard, Philip Glass. *Cultural recycling, Performance, and immediacy in Philip Glass's film music for Godfrey Reggie's Qatsi trilogy*, in: *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media*, ed. G. Harper, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2009, p. 493.

¹³⁵ J. Solomon, *Our decentered culture...*, p. 38.

¹³⁶ P. Bradshaw, "Visitors Review - 'Graceful and dreamlike'," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2014, accessed July 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/apr/03/visitors-review>.

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PĘDZĄCA POWOLNOŚĆ: NEOMODERNISTYCZNA ESTETYKA KONTEMPLACYJNEGO I WZNIOSŁEGO KINA W TRYLOGII QATS/ GODFREY'A REGGIO **(streszczenie)**

Przedmiotem artykułu jest próba przedstawienia i analizy wybranych środków artystycznych wykorzystanych w eksperymentalnych filmach dokumentalnych Godfrey'a Reggio, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Powaqqatsi* (1988) i *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), tradycyjnie związanych z estetyką tzw. kina wolnego (slow cinema) oraz wzniosłego (sublime cinema). Nurt *slow*-kina, definiowany jako "różnorodny gatunek ascetycznego kina minimalistycznego" (Romney 2010) i charakteryzujący się częstym użyciem "długich ujęć, zredukowanych i powściągliwych modułów narracji, oraz ekspozycją ciszy i codzienności" (Flanagan 2008), jest często postrzegany jako kreatywna ewolucja stylu transcendentalnego Schradera lub, szerzej, tendencji neomodernistycznych we współczesnej kinematografii (Syska 2014). Chociaż atrybuty tejże stylistyki analizowane jest głównie w dziełach wiodących przedstawicieli gatunku, takich jak Tarkowski, Bergman, Bresson, Antonioni czy też Sokurow, ich obecność dostrzegana jest również w eksperymentalnym, awangardowym oraz realistycznym filmie dokumentalnym (Flanagan 2012), który w większym stopniu kładzie nacisk na kontemplacyjne aniżeli wolne aspekty ukazywanych scen i motywów (Tuttle 2012). Tymczasem analiza materiału filmowego autorstwa Reggio pod względem ww. cech gatunkowych może prowadzić do wniosku, iż trylogia *Qatsi*, będąca atypowym przykładem *slow*-kina, dosyć wyraźnie wykorzystuje konwencje oparte zarówno na stylistycznym nadmiarze wzniosłego kina niewerbalnego (Thompson 1977; Bagatavicius 2015), jak i walorach kina kontemplacyjnego, takich jak spowolnione tempo, trwanie, anty-narracja czy też realizm typu Bazinowskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: filmowy neomodernizm, wolne kino, wzniosłe kino, amerykański eksperymentalny film dokumentalny, Godfrey Reggio, trylogia *Qatsi*.