Koyaanisqatsi

Koyaanisqatsi is a film like no other. Spelled K-O-Y-A-A-N-I-S-Q-A-T-S-I This American film, Made in 1982, was produced using the remnants of an activist group’s fund raising efforts. The group, sponsored by the widely known organization, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), called themselves the Institute for Regional Education and had spoken out against uses of technology to control behavior, namely with the substance Ritalin. After their organization had some success they sank money into other efforts and were left with only $40,000. They decided to produce this film with that money.

The scattered way in which the film was produced lends itself to the meaning that it is trying to convey which is that life itself is unbalanced. Apart from how the film was funded other oddities surround it. The film makes a commentary on society without ever uttering a word. The stunning images of nature juxtaposed with scenes of cities hurriedly rushing to meet deadlines gives the viewer a unique third person view of society. Like looking in on something that one is not actually a part of. It gives the audience a moment to step back and see how still and beautiful the world can be.

When I said that the film “never utters a word” it was meant literally. There is no dialogue, no voice over, and no auditory explanation as to what the film is about. This fact makes it all the more amazing that people who view it tend to comprehend a similar meaning from the sequence of landscapes presented to the audience. The director has stated that there was no intentional aim in the meaning of the film, but instead it was meant to be left up to interpretation of the viewer. That being said I have never heard an account of the film that didn’t seem to have found some profound message hidden within the lively images captured by the film. It is possible that people tend to impose their own world views on to the film and indeed I feel this is true but that is not the point. The point and importance of the film is that it makes the audience think.

The word Koyaanisqatsi literally means unbalanced life. This word comes from the Hopi language, a language primarily located on a Native American reserve in the Northeastern corner of Arizona. The use of this word as the title for the film is most likely due to the fact that all involved with the original production of this film are in fact from New Mexico a state bordering Arizona. The title lends an ominous tone to the movie. The foreign word gives impressions of a foreign world, when in fact all of the locations from the film can be found in the United States.

The foreign sense that the film gives off can largely be accredited to the musical score. The music, specifically orchestrated for the film, plays a massively important role in setting a context. If the films footage was only accompanied by silence in a theatre it would be hard to believe that anyone could bare to sit through the hour and 25 minutes of scenery presented before them. The music essentially fills in the blanks left by the photographs. If a picture is worth a thousand words then this film is worth a million. The ever changing style and intensity of the music throughout the film drives the unstated narrative. Philip glass, the composer of the uniquely minimalistic style of music found in Koyaanisqatsi, was one of the first to employ such a style of music into the score of a movie. Before he ever started work on this particular project he was already an accomplished composer. He had operas and theatres that already could give him credit for helping their works become successes.

The director of the film,