

Seeing One Another Anew with Godfrey Reggio's *Visitors*

Eran Guter and Inbal Guter

Godfrey Reggio's *Visitors* (2014) is a film that one has the immediate urge to flag up as being an example of a 'philosophical' film in lieu of a better term, superlative or derogatory. Our approach in this essay is tempered by Ben-Ami Scharfstein's (2009) soft-spoken reminder that an example has an independent existence with a rich, maybe endless, set of characteristics of its own. It has a life apart from the abstraction it illustrates. "The more fully the example is described, the more directions it leads in, until, imagined from its innumerable possible angles, it leads everywhere imaginable" (2009, p. 434). Thus, we opt for a 'thick description' in presenting some of the thoughts and insights that *Visitors* occasions. Paradoxical as it may sound, if we let *Visitors* have its life apart from philosophy—that is, apart from the abstraction which it purportedly illustrates—it will usher philosophy in.

Visitors is the fourth major collaboration between filmmaker Godfrey Reggio and composer Philip Glass, following their so-called 'Qatsi Trilogy': *Koyaanisqatsi* (1984), *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002). *Visitors* continues to explore some familiar moral themes from the 'Quatsi Trilogy'. In so doing it offers a lamentation for the havoc that humankind's obsession with technological advancement has wreaked on our world and a concomitant urge to be more human and gentler. The film stands out both formally (it is shot almost exclusively in black and white) and in terms of its subject matter: Reggio's focus is on portraits of individuals (including one lowland gorilla), nearly all of them photographed in close-up, probing their subtle nuances, fleeting expressions and various permutations thereof. Extended sequences in the film consist of successions of exceedingly slow-motion photography ('live stills'), which delve into a range of possibilities of reciprocal gazing: as we look at these portraits, they look back at us, as it were. More than merely portraying the individuals who occupy the screen as passing visitors aboard 'Starship Earth,' the film explores the human face as the final frontier, bringing its viewers into uncanny, intimate encounters with these living portraits; as if it is we who are the visitors—onlookers at some sort of cinematic menagerie inhabited by humans.

The concept of *Visitors* germinated gradually over more than a decade. Sediments of defunct interim projects can be identified in the film's final form. Reggio initially developed a film, *The Border*, that drew on Butoh-style techniques to explore a range of emotive human expressions, which then morphed into the cinematic exploration of the live stills at the heart of *Visitors*. Images from *Savage Eden* include a fantastic vision of primates in a pew. These are reimagined in *Visitors* into a long panning shot in *Visitors*, in which we track along the faces of five human beings, all deeply engaged in computer games (Reggio calls them 'cyborgs'), arriving at a gorilla, who becomes 'the adult in the room,' the only individual in the film not connected to technology in any sense.

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 deeply affected Reggio, who was born and raised in New Orleans. As his original plan for a cinematic reflection on the catastrophe in Louisiana, *Evidence*, stalled, he realized that "as these places moldered over several years, this evidence was becoming like a visage, like a huge set for the ruins of modernity, a modern Pompeii—in other words, more aesthetically articulate" (MacDonald, 2014, p. 349). In *Visitors*, the aestheticized outlook on the desolate landscapes of Louisiana not only endows the film with a sense of mourning, a requiem for the 'New Order for the Ages' (the phrase 'Novum Ordo Seclorum' is seen on the somber art deco building in the opening sequence), but also, and much more significantly for the film's purpose throughout, it offsets the cinematic menagerie of humans by showing us a world without us.

The working title for *Visitors* throughout most of the making of the film was *Holy See* (meant to be taken as a kind of exclamation like ‘holy smoke’ or ‘holy moly’ rather than a reference to the Vatican; see MacDonald, 2014, p. 349), and by then Reggio’s cinematic imagination seems to have approached Rilkean exquisiteness. “Holy See” meant for Reggio (MacDonald, 2014, p. 349) “to see that which the eye cannot see, to make the invisible visible, to see that which is hidden in plain sight”. For Rilke (1948, p. 374), the ephemerality of human existence is the locus for a special kind of transformative poetic activity, which he famously described in a letter to his friend, the poet and publisher, Witold Hulewicz, on 13.11.1925:

Our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again “invisibly” in us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hives of the invisible.

The transformative task that *Visitors* sets out to perform is captured in Reggio’s idiosyncratic notion of “an autodidactic film” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 353):

[I]n any art, and particularly in the case of—dare I say—poetic cinema, much more is suggested than is intended by those who make it. If it has a presence, a film takes on a life of its own; it outsmarts the art that was intended. [...] The *meaning*, in this case, the subject of this film, is the person watching the film. I wanted to avoid a didactic piece, but I came to realize that what I was making was an *autodidactic* film. *Visitors* has no intrinsic meaning, all meaning is in the eye of the beholder. Each member of the audience must become the storyteller, must become the character and plot of the film.

The film is meant to ‘outsmart’ and transcend the boundaries of its purported medium. As it takes on a life of its own, it spills over and intervenes in the phraseologies of its viewers, “in social contexts of seeking and finding one another through words and images, shaped in a communal context in which harmonies of engagement, rather than consensus, are at stake” (Floyd, 2019, p. 716). That is to say, in our world, the world of ‘cyborgs’—wherein a ‘New Order of the Ages’ means growing more and more technologically interconnected and communality means being alone together (Turkle, 2011)—harmonies of engagement need to be recovered offline. “Technology for me is probably the most misunderstood subject on the planet,” said Reggio in an interview; “We keep thinking of it as another category, like the economy, like religion, like war, but it is [as] ubiquitous as the air we breathe and we’re strapped in and on the ride” (The Creators Project, 2014). And so, we tend to forget the social world and our own embedded, embodied plasticities, as we place significance in the wrong place, in the wrong way (Floyd, 2019). This is where *Visitors* intervenes: in the end-user’s conversation.

In *Visitors*, the transformative ‘spill over’ into the end-user’s conversation begins with the reciprocal gaze. The film posits itself as a seeing aid, designed to situate the (cyborg) viewer, bewilderingly or even uneasily, as needing to reacquire the capacity to see human beings *as* human beings. Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us that our knowledge of people, of human beings (*Menschenkenntnis*) draws upon “imponderable evidence” (2009, p. 240), a mixture of immediate certainty and indeterminacy that characterizes our perception and understanding of other people’s emotions, expressions, feelings, reactions, intentions, and thoughts. A proficient knower of human beings is endowed with a sensibility to the physiognomy of the human; capacities to perceive and judge the nature, moods, dispositions, and states of mind of other human beings, which to a certain extent we can teach one another. “What is most difficult here is to express this indefiniteness correctly, and without distortion,”

Wittgenstein (2009, p. 239) points out. That is why the phraseologies of the viewers matter—our social, evolving forms of lives with words.

According to Wittgenstein, “imponderable evidence includes subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone” (2009, p. 240). We may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one, yet may be quite incapable of describing the difference, and this is not due to any deficiency of language. “The face is an uncanny semaphore”, Daniel McNeill writes. “We rely on these signals constantly and willy-nilly, for almost none of us can define them. We are reading a language we cannot articulate and may not consciously notice” (2000, p. 8). Reggio’s live stills introduce such imponderable evidence into the resources that *Visitors* offers, as a seeing aid. In one scene, he introduces a laughing person “at a point where you don’t know if he’s screaming or laughing. He was laughing, but it’s like that wonderful Baudelaire line about humor being the stigmata of Original Sin. Humor and tragedy, twins, same mother—an insight into consciousness” (MacDonald 2014, p. 352). In other scenes, Reggio discovers “the virtue of an inhumanly slow move into the face so that the face you see at the beginning of the shot is not the face you see at the end. This face may be a mirror of the face within us all” (MacDonald, 214, p. 351).



Figure 1: The proverbial doubles of who we are

The indefiniteness of the perceived difference between the genuine and the dissembled glance harbors an aspect-experience. Wittgenstein (2009) famously introduces this concept by considering how we observe a face and suddenly notice its likeness to another. In *Visitors*, the other face, the aspect that dawns upon us, is *us* as the human beings we are; “the face within us all”. Reggio explains:

Essentially, the people in *Visitors*, be they humans looking “at you” or people playing games, are the proverbial doubles of who *we* are. In daily life we see ourselves as doubles through shadows, reflections, through spirits, but we can also see ourselves through other people. Their gaze brings us into a dialogue with ourselves, but the specific nature of the dialogue is up to the viewer. (p. 355-356) See Figure 1.

While the particular substance of these prompted dialogues remains up to the viewer, such dialogues nonetheless share a point. It dawns upon us that what we used to ‘see’ as a matter of course, we were not really *seeing*, and that we are now able to really see ourselves - to see ourselves anew. So much so that we realise our observation and contemplation of human beings may have become routine to the point of blindness to the experience of seeing human beings *as* human beings. Our human capacities and sensibilities have been eroded by use, forgetfulness, or carelessness, as we regularly, by neat sleight of hand, offload our tasks as knowers of human beings to the calculative routines of some piece of technology. Yet, as William Day points out, “from the standpoint of our loss of interest in our experience, aspect blindness will seem to us not unimaginable as a human possibility at all, but quite familiar, a kind of fixed literal-mindedness in taking in the world” (2010, p. 218-219).

The live stills of *Visitors* shatter this routine, shake up any fixed literal mindedness we bring to relating to one another, and render the familiar uncommon again by enabling us to recapture the uncanniness of what it is to be human. They evince what Reshef Agam-Segal calls “non-preparatory aspect-seeing” that targets the poverty of one’s concept of the human by enabling the viewer to expand and explore this concept in ways, and with resources, that surpass what any norm-laden use of language could capture (2012, p. 10-11).

We take one of the cinematic achievements of *Visitors* to illuminate the extent to which we experience such aspect blindness —“soul blindness”, as Cavell calls it (1982)—endemically. We become withdrawn with respect to the extent to which our being in the world is internally related to our ability to see one another anew in it. As Avner Baz aptly puts it, “our relation to the world, as revealed by the dawning of aspects, is one in which we continually have to restore an intimacy with the world—an intimacy that is forever at stake, and that if taken for granted is bound to be lost” (2010, p. 238). To avail ourselves of Rilke’s ecstatic words, what may rise again invisibly in us is such intimacy with the world. *Visitors* also offers us a powerful reminder that there is a residual area of what is not offloaded to some auxiliary routine, that is beyond the norm-laden uses of language, in which our recognition and understanding of each other’s human physiognomy may be contested, redesigned, and reinterpreted. In engaging with the film, we are transformed, recognising an achievement that does indeed “outsmart” whatever art that might have been intended; the possibility of a growing, deepening conversation betokens one’s hope for finding one another.

Seeing one another anew in, and by means of, *Visitors* is enabled by various cinematic strategies of *dépaysement*, which are comparable in spirit to Cavell’s skeptical thought experiment concerning the possibility and import of soul blindness. “Could it be that human beings are in human guise?” he asks; “Suppose that there are in our world such things as human guises, ‘bodies’ that for all the world seem inhabited but happen not to be, i.e. seem to be human beings but happen not to be” (1982, p. 380). While Cavell’s musings predate our brave new world of avatars, bots, and fake profiles in social media, this nonetheless makes the comparison with *Visitors* even more poignant if one encounters the film as dwelling in, or a dwelling place for, human guises.

The first layer of *dépaysement* pertains to Reggio’s employment of live stills as discussed above. Bringing the imponderable evidence concerning the physiognomy of the human too close for comfort, in abundant visual detail, in extreme slow motion, does not render it any less imponderable. The second layer is Reggio’s decision to shoot the film in black and white. According to Reggio, “color contemporizes the film image and would have been less emotive. In some cases this can be useful, but for this film I didn’t want to represent the contemporary; I wanted to put *Visitors* in an otherworldly zone” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 352). Next, the entire film is set up as two reflecting panels: (1) a world without us (the desolate landscapes); and (2) us without the world (the menagerie of humans). The first panel is bookended by computer-generated images of the barren surface of the moon and includes,

among other things, shots of the monolithic ‘Novum Ordo Seclorum’ building, which represents for Reggio modernity itself, together with eerie images from a deserted amusement park and an autumnal forsaken swamp. “The building and the structures in the amusement park were all shot in infrared,” says Reggio (MacDonald, 2014, p. 353), “so the sky disappears and when clouds are present, they’re ghostlike. For me, seeing the building after the opening shot of the moon puts the building and us squarely *on* the moon”. The swamp was “the perfect companion for what I was trying to suggest with the moon. The contrariety of the swamp has a palpable primordial presence; it’s otherworldly” (2014, p. 355).

The second panel (the menagerie of humans) includes a series of live stills, all shot separately, either directly (“humans” looking straight at us) or through a two-way mirror (“cyborgs” watching their screens as we observe them from the fictional point of view of the technology), and one group scene, shot at a sports bar. It also features (in the third movement of the film) an exquisite slow-motion ballet of disembodied fingers in three parts: a mouse-movement/picture-enlarging solo; a texting *pas de deux*; and a keyboard-playing *pas de deux*. Here *dépaysement* takes the form of dislocating human physiognomy from its worldly or otherwise technology-related affairs by eliminating all the details of the space around the faces or hands. Reggio calls this “the blackground”, which was part of his original motivation for this project: “I wanted a way to use split screening that would be hidden in plain sight, and using the blackground was important for this; it allowed me to put multiple faces 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, p. 352).

As the two reflecting panels are brought to reflect one another over the course of the film we experience the urgency of their combined afterimage: the return of an intimacy that was lost when the world and our humanity, was taken for granted. This occurs as the various materials are juxtaposed into “a pictorial composition, a syntax for the eye”, as Reggio puts it; “It’s not about text,” he avers, “it’s about texture” (MacDonald, 2014, p. 355). This is shown, most strikingly, in a textural anomaly at the beginning of the final movement of the film, entitled ‘The Reciprocal Gaze’: we see the barren surface of the moon, again in black and white, itself set in the “blackground” of space, and then we witness the rising of a familiarly blue earth, the only bit of color in the whole film. Our off-planet perception of our own world regains sensual intimacy for a moment.

Another textural anomaly, which is crucially important in *Visitors*, is the liminal presence of the gorilla. Reggio chose Triska, a lowland female gorilla and resident of the Bronx Zoo, for the likeness of her face to the human face—an aspect-experience to be sure. Reggio often refers in interviews to Loren Eiseley’s dictum “one does not meet oneself until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human” (1969, p. 12). With Triska, the otherworldly is rendered as intimately known, yet at the same time, the intimately known is reflected uncannily. There are three slow-motion medium close-ups of Triska fixing her gaze on the viewer. These were culled from several hours of slow-motion recording in which the footage was shot through the thick glass of an indoor viewing area of the “Congo gorilla forest” habitat. In postproduction, rotoscoping was used to cut the image of Triska, frame by frame, out of the trees and greenery of the zoo and place her, dressed up in majestic silver sheen, in the “blackground” (Murphy, 2014). Triska was digitally extracted and dislocated from her non-human world and placed in the cinematic menagerie of humans only to come across ironically as more human by comparison to the other individuals (all “cyborgs”) in the pew. A remnant from Reggio’s defunct project *Savage Eden*, Triska traverses both reflecting panels of *Visitors*. Like the moon shots, her otherworldly appearance bookends the film. Yet placing her *in*—and in the final tableau, *on the limits of*—the menagerie of humans thereby both engenders and overcomes *dépaysement*.

Considering the texture of *Visitors*, one cannot overestimate the importance of Reggio's collaboration with composer Philip Glass. Working intensely together on the *Qatsi Trilogy*, Reggio and Glass developed a unique hand-in-glove rapport. Glass was involved in the development of the concept of the film, went to locations, saw all the rushes, and throughout his work on the score was fully integrated into the whole process of the film (MacDonald, 1992). That did not change in *Visitors*. Reggio recalls that:

[Glass] talked with us about creating a dance of music and image, so that one wouldn't overwhelm the other, so that music and image would blend into one synergetic movement. [...] Here, we were asking for a full orchestral score: in effect, a narrative for the film, an emotive armchair in which to view the images. [...] Philip's first writings were beautiful, but they were too symphonic and tended to overwhelm the images. Being someone who can function in a critical forum, Philip understood our feedback—and started over. At one point he had a Eureka moment and said, "What you're asking is that I write for the attention of the audience; I get it." He went back to his studio and we got two pieces of music in less than a week, and they were spot on (MacDonald, 2014, p. 350-351).

Two issues are relevant here: the distinct nature of *Visitors* as a hybrid art form (combining cinema and music) and what Glass refers to as his 'Eureka moment' when working on the development of the work. Both pertain to the sense of refraction which is conducive to the quest of seeing one another anew.

Glass already had extensive experience with hybrid art forms before meeting Reggio. His first opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, composed in 1975 in collaboration with stage artist Robert Wilson, is a juxtapositional hybrid, wherein the contributing elements are distinct and separable from one another, forming a whole by the summation of elements (to a distinctly disintegrative effect) rather than by the merging or dissolution of boundaries between the constitutive art forms (Levinson, 1984). The first Reggio/Glass collaboration, *Koyaanisqatsi*, is also a juxtapositional hybrid which often capitalizes on the cognitive overload generated by juxtaposing Reggio's signature time-lapse technique and Glass's incessant repetitions, and featuring the progressive sound-world of the Philip Glass Ensemble.

The case of *Visitors* is different. The music is not simply added to the images (to illustrate or negate them), but affords a narrative for the film, which is bound to be abstract due to Glass's minimalist idiom, wherein content suggests form yet also vice versa. *Visitors* extends the possible ways in which images and music co-exist, enabling them to "blend into one synergetic movement"; Reggio stated uncompromisingly that his collaboration with Glass on *Visitors* was that of "a deaf person who works through Philip Glass's ears" (The Creator Project, 2014). This renders *Visitors* a synthetic hybrid in which some essential or defining features of one or both arts are challenged, modified, or withdrawn (Levinson, 1984). Glass's 'Eureka moment' occurred when he realized that he was not supposed to illustrate Reggio's images musically, but rather to present the music for the attention of the viewer. His realization recaptured the original impetus for the emergence of the musical scene known as "New York Minimalism", of which Glass was one of the leading lights. This impetus concerned the nature, purpose, and effect of gradual musical processes. It is captured in an oft-quoted text written in 1968 by composer Steve Reich, Glass's comrade-in-arms at the time:

While performing and listening to gradual musical processes, one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process

makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it* (2004, p. 36)

In *Visitors*, this means that the concrete synthesis of images and music is achieved by way of refraction, as the significance of the images bounces off the surface of an autonomous gradual musical process. This is most striking when an auratic afterimage emerges in the various juxtapositions of the aforementioned reflecting panels. Some beautiful examples include the transition from a close-up on the expressive face of an elderly woman to a shot of the monolithic building (in the second movement of the film, 'The Day Room') and the transition from the expressive outburst of the group at the sports bar to the slow-motion gesturing of an expressionless puppet (in the fourth movement, 'Off-Planet, Part 2'). The terms for the co-existence of music and cinematic imagery in *Visitors* are clearly refashioned as Glass's minimalist techniques for slowing down musical motion, reducing content, and simplifying texture decisively offset the unusual levels of semantic density and syntactic repleteness (Goodman, 1976) of the photography, engendered by Reggio's decision to shoot the film, which consists of only 74 shots, on 3K and 5K high-definition video and release it in 4K. To echo Reich's description of gradual musical processes, the musical narrative invites us to participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual, which soothes and primes us to dwell in, and take in such extremely fine-grained, slow pacing visual abundance.

Glass's most original contribution to *Visitors* is, however, ideational. Rather than serving merely as "an emotive armchair in which to view the images", his autonomous musical processes incorporate content, which, although being minimal, binds the film right from the outset, irrevocably and subversively, to Ludwig van Beethoven's *Ninth* Symphony, a composition which has become synonymous in our common culture with a celebration of a harmonious society (Levy, 2003). At the beginning of the film, as Triska slowly emerges from the 'background' before our eyes for the first time, Glass introduces Beethoven's signature 'whispering' fifth (the interval of A-E), the core sound unit which opens the Ninth Symphony in a sustained hushed tremolo.

This surprising opening of Beethoven's symphony, consisting solely of this fifth and its complementary fourth (marking the basic division of an octave) in changing dynamics, has become not only identified with this work (on a par with its concluding *Ode to Joy*), but also a celebrated model, for later composers, of how one might treat raw musical material frugally. Glass begins his overture to *Visitors* with the same interval, in the same pitches, using it both as a symbolic sign and as material for his gradual musical processes, which strive to lay bare minute changes for the viewer's attention through the prolonged, controlled, and repetitive exposure of new elements. Glass not only borrows Beethoven's signature sound unit as content, but also emulates Beethoven's use of this musical content as a means for creating textural distinction and suspense. Like Beethoven, Glass isolates this interval in the acoustic space. But he does so by harnessing the devices of minimalism: tweaking the duration of the two pitches as they repeat, combining various elaborations of the interval (arpeggios, melodic intervals, and harmonic intervals) and so forth.

Glass's incessant minimalist treatment of Beethoven's 'whispering' fifth deepens the sense of *dépaysement* as the reflecting panel of a world without us unfolds for the first time: Triska, the moon, the desolate monolithic building inscribed with 'Novum Ordo Seclorum'. In the inner movements of the film, 'Off Planet', Parts 1 and 2, as Reggio intensifies his cinematic exploration of 'cyborgs' toward the climactic group scene, Glass further elaborates this core material by emulating some of Beethoven's unusual techniques in the finale of his symphony. Beethoven increases the tonal tension by using certain pitch combinations which create dissonant sonorities. Some of Beethoven's harsh critics at the time complained about what they described as unpleasant sound collisions. Similarly, Glass increases tonal tension in these inner

movements by gradually incorporating the original core content with other components so as to generate moments of dissonance and tension. When one allows these subdued allusions to Beethoven's *Ninth*, and by implication also to the images associated with Schiller's *An die Freude* of the ecstatic undifferentiated communality of the band of brothers (Solomon, 1991), to impinge upon one, they lend *Visitors* an additional poignancy; indeed they deliver the very requiem envisioned by Reggio (MacDonald, 2014).

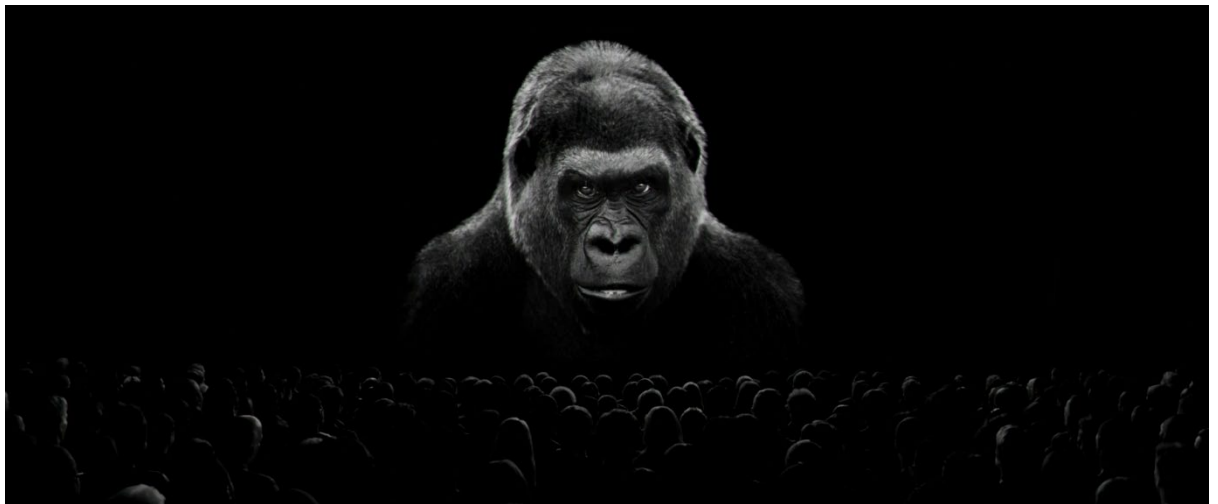


Figure 2: The reciprocal gaze

As *Visitors* draws to an end, everything comes together in a strikingly self-reflexive final tableau. Following the textural anomaly of the rising of a blue earth, as seen from a black and white surface of the moon, we see Triska again—our liminal, panel-traversing ligature to the cinematic achievement that is *Visitors*. Glass's orchestra undergirds the cyclical structure of the film by intoning again Beethoven's 'whispering' fifth. Reggio's camera slowly pulls back, revealing the configuration of the reciprocal gaze. As Triska looks directly at us (the viewers), we find her on the big screen in a theater crowded with mesmerized viewers, that is, at the very limits of the menagerie of humans. See Figure 2. For a moment, the cinematic wherewithal - in all its diaphanous glory - is fully exposed for our intellectual perusal. Triska watches us and the other inhabitants of the menagerie, as we watch her watching us all, and watch all the others watching her. As the music intensifies, Triska's image fades into blinding white, engulfing everything: the screen within the theater, the theater itself with its inhabitants, our screen and us. We lose sight inside the seeing aid. As the end titles appear, we are left with an eerie image of dispersal: ink droplets dissolving upside-down in slow-motion in a clear liquid. The relentless, softly searching pulsation of Beethoven's 'whispering' fifth, now an idle wheel, is punctuated by occasional flashes of an A Major chord, gesturing aimlessly at the triumphant change of mode, from minor to major, with which Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* culminates.

Now is the time for the end-user's conversation to reengage and regain traction as we carry a sense of *dépaysement* back into our worldly affairs. Seeing ourselves and others anew, we don't just refresh, but extend our *Menschenkenntnis* and thereby also the aesthetic puzzlements pertaining to human life. Outsmarting their medium, transformative works of film art have a unique role to play in this. Such works relate to philosophy's most cherished, age-

old instinct, voiced by Socrates in Plato's *Theaetetus*, that "wonder is the only beginning of philosophy".

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