

A Cinema Guild Release



Manakamana

A film by Stephanie Spray & Pacho Velez

118 minutes / DCP / 1.85:1 / Dolby / U.S. / Not Rated
Nepali and English with English Subtitles
Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

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SYNOPSIS

From the producers of *Leviathan*, comes a stunning new journey, an exhilarating documentary that takes place entirely in the sky. High above Nepal's lush, mountainous landscape, a cable car carries pilgrims, villagers and the occasional American tourist to an ancient Hindu temple. For centuries, devoted followers had to undertake an arduous multi-day trek to reach the shrine of the wish-fulfilling goddess Manakamana. Today, the trip takes just under 10 minutes. Filmed entirely inside these cable cars as they glide over fog-enshrouded peaks and remote villages, *Manakamana* captures the conversations of its passengers – personal exchanges, anecdotes, shared observations on the landscape below – and emerges with a rich, vibrant view of Nepal, a land of ancient traditions and rituals on the brink of a technologically-powered future.

ABOUT THE FILM

MANAKAMANA premiered at the 2013 Festival del Film Locarno, in Locarno, Switzerland, where it received a Golden Leopard.

Other festival engagements include:

Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada 2013

New York Film Festival, New York, USA 2013

Viennale, Vienna, Austria 2013

AFI Fest, Los Angeles, USA 2013

CPH:DOX, Copenhagen, Denmark 2013

RIDM, Montreal, Canada 2013

International Film Festival of Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands 2014

**DIRECTORS STEPHANIE SPRAY AND PACHO VELEZ ANSWER COMMON QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE MAKING OF THEIR FILM IN AN INTERVIEW WITH
PRODUCERS LUCIEN CASTAING-TAYLOR AND VÉRÉNA PARAVEL.**

VP/LCT: What was the origin of the film? Why Nepal? How did you come up with the idea of making a film consisting of single shots lasting the duration of a roll of film set entirely inside a cable car in rural South Asia?

SS: I have been working and living in Nepal on and off since 1999. I started making films there in 2006. In 2010, I had been shooting in a small village outside Pokhara, mostly with a woman named Bindu and her family — she appears in the second shot of MANAKAMANA, holding a basket of flowers. I was feeling stymied because life in the village had become predictable, and so I started looking for ways to shake up what I was shooting. I had heard about a cable car that took passengers to the popular Hindu temple of Manakamana, the wish-fulfilling goddess, and thought a cable car would be a novel location for a film. I offered to take Bindu and her son Kamal on the cable car, and shot the ride on video. This experience made me feel that the surreality of riding in the cable car, high above the jungle, and the mix of emotions the trip inspires, was worthy of a film in itself. I imagined it would revolve around the circuit of the cable car and be composed of a series of shots of passengers for the duration of their rides, but little more.

PV: Stephanie told me about this later when she was back at the Sensory Ethnography Lab in Cambridge. I mentioned a film set in passenger trains in Thailand called *Are We There Yet?* by Sompot Chidgasornpongse, in particular some shots of people sitting and looking out the window. They were filmed with a tripod, so the seats and windows of the train were firmly fixed while the landscape scrolled past. These moments were relatively short, but I had the sense that inside of them was the kernel of another film, something that would combine portraiture and landscape in a more rigorous, sustained way. For me, the choice to work in Nepal was largely incidental. I like traveling and experiencing different cultures, and I think that ‘foreignness’ can be a useful element in films when it functions as an alienation effect to let audiences see something familiar with fresh eyes, but I am more animated by themes like performance, mobility, and technology than by a deep investment in any one particular culture. I think that Stephanie feels quite differently, and the difference has been productive for our collaboration.

VP/LCT: How did you arrive at the formal structure of the film, and the sequence of shots?

PV: When I was a student at CalArts, I directed quite a bit of theater, and I was intrigued about the “doubleness” of acting — actors’ studied non-attention to their audience. This interest carries over for me into MANAKAMANA — I’m watching the subjects’ awareness of their world, and how it shifts to acknowledge the passing landscape, other passengers, and private thoughts, before occasionally, obliquely returning to the camera, which is so clearly staring at them, yet is never explicitly addressed. These switches between different sorts of focus are crucial because they create the pace of the individual shots, which in turn creates the rhythm of the entire film. To make edits in the shots would have imposed another sort of rhythm on top of the material, obscuring these

internal cadences. Our pace of editing was glacial. The final film has only eleven shots but it took us eighteen months of editing to arrive at it, which works out to our deciding on one shot every forty days or so.

SS: We decided at the outset that the units of the film would be uncut 10-11 minute shots lasting the length of an entire 400' magazine of 16 mm film. How to structure these shots became a puzzle that we worked on for an eternity. We tried many variations, but decided early on that the trips inside the cable car would travel up the mountain to the top station and then, a little over the halfway mark, the trips would all return to the bottom.

VP/LCT: Non-fiction and fiction films alike are cast. How did you cast this film? What were you looking for in your characters?

SS: Many of the characters we chose were from villages where I had been making previous films, because we already trusted one another, and they were at ease in front of a camera. The three older women in MANAKAMANA are my adopted Nepali mothers and two of them are co-wives. Pacho and I took advantage of these established relationships, since they were the least performative and the folks were more engaged with the landscape and the ride than the two of us with our equipment. Others, such as the American woman and her Nepali friend, were only acquaintances and we didn't quite know what to expect, but we were happily surprised. Contrary to what many assume, Pacho and I were both inside the 5'x5' cable car along with our riders; we didn't simply send them off alone; this would have been technically almost impossible and wouldn't have created the same tensions — between avowal or disavowal of the camera, and the different degrees of complicity, indifference, and discomfiture it engenders.

PV: Casting is a guilty pleasure. I get to inspect people, head to toe, in a way that would be totally unacceptable in other parts of my life. It's this intuitive, haphazard process that boils down to a single, fairly rude, question -- do I want to look at this person for an extended period of time? Someone who, for whatever reason, captivates us.

VP/LCT: The film is by turns quotidian and mythic; profane and sacred; ludic and solemn; and intimate and removed. What do you see as the relationship between these various polarities in the film, and how did you put them into play?

PV: These shifts enter the film through changes in the quality of our characters' attention as they experience 'transport,' both up the hill via the cable car as well as the spiritual movement that comes from visiting a holy place. The body and the spirit, the sacred and the profane — in our quiet fashion, we tried to capture some part of the ebb and flow between them. For hundreds of years, people had to walk up this hill to visit the temple. And the cable car changed that journey from an active experience into a passive one. It turned pilgrims into passengers. Which makes me think about how technology has shifted people's relationship to seemingly fixed quantities like distance and time, and through these changes altered basic social concepts like family, religion, and tradition.

SS: These polarities can be likened to audiences' shifting perceptions between the foreground (the human subjects and the space of the cable car) and background (the

massive landscape which is never revealed or encompassed as a whole). The two are always present and can, at times, be perceived together, but frequently exceed our ability to engage them both at once. The sacred and profane are intertwined for the pilgrims, whereas the sacred recedes and can only be experienced vicariously by most day tourists and foreigners.

VP/LCT: One of the most striking qualities of MANAKAMANA is that it has a fictional feel at the same time as an ethnographic investment in subjectivity and cultural difference and a documentary engagement with the real. Could you talk a little about these characteristics of the film?

SS: All fiction films retain a degree of documentary, in that they document performances, although this is more or less obscured in mainstream films with quick edits and effects. The works of fiction that I find the most compelling are those that give us time to linger in the space of shots, rather than hurriedly propel us forward by narrative agendas. It would have been impossible for us to recreate this film with the same subtlety had we hired professional actors and given them a script describing the same scenes and dynamics between subjects. The opening scene in Nicolas Pereda's film *Perpetuum Mobile* shows an elderly woman fumbling about with Kleenex tissues, slipping them in and out of her pockets, while sitting on a bed. It is framed oddly, as if the camera is hidden. It's completely genius and astounding and I often wondered how he directed her in this scene; for it is purportedly about nothing, and yet it is extremely powerful. I feel her presence and her realness because in that moment she is no mere character. I later learned that this woman hadn't been directed at all, but rather the camera had simply been left rolling, unbeknownst to her. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction is frequently murky and the documentary engagement with the real is found across genres, but extremely hard to get on film, since most film subjects slip into becoming someone other than themselves, self-conscious representations, even if they are not purportedly acting. In *MANAKAMANA*, the trip itself is surreal; passengers are propelled above a jungle in Nepal, en route to a temple inhabited by a goddess who demands blood sacrifice. Most passengers have never been in airplanes and the time aloft can be frightening and exhilarating. This detachment it bestows upon the journey for the passengers heightens the sense that this world is fictional, for it is indeed a manufactured and unnatural experience for most of them.

PV: I do a lot of my thinking about dramatic structure, aesthetics, and pacing through the lens of theater and of fiction. I'm also much more engaged by the ethical discussions around consent and representation in fiction than in documentary. And I like that fiction more often trusts its audience to luxuriate in images and sounds without worrying too much about conveying information. When properly employed, this reticence encourages audiences to actively generate their own understanding of an ambiguous situation. Documentarians can use the strategy too, though for many it seems too fuzzy, too open to multiple interpretations or misunderstandings. But embracing this reticence is, I think, where the element of fiction enters into *MANAKAMANA*.

VP/LCT: What was your division of labor in the film? And what was the recording set-up in the cable cars?

PV: Magicians. Secrets. Et cetera.

SS: Pacho operated the camera, the Aaton 7 LTR, while I recorded sound with a shotgun stereo microphone on a two-channel sound recorder. We knew we wanted consistent framing, so we hired Nepali carpenters to build a stable wooden base which we anchored our hi-hat tripod to. The camera we used had special significance for us as it was the same camera used by ethnographic filmmaker Robert Gardner for his 1986 masterpiece *Forest of Bliss*, which was shot in the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi, also a very popular pilgrimage site. Aware of the legacy of his films, we were propelled to think about how our film would relate to the portrayal of the ethnographic Other in film, and how we could counteract that.

VP/LCT: Why did you shoot on 16 mm film? What's wrong with digital?

SS: We chose to shoot on film not only for aesthetic reasons, but because it lends structural integrity to our commitment to filming the full duration of rides on the cable car. The time that elapses over a 400' magazine of 16 mm film is roughly how long it takes for a ride up or down the mountain. The cable of the Manakamana cable car also runs parallel to the spool of film as it is exposed to light.

PV: Film is beautiful. And messy in just the right ways. A clean, crisp digital image would have felt incongruous. It would have allied the film's aesthetics with the engineers who designed the cable car instead of the locals who use it. Also, both motion picture cameras and cable cars are machines that measure time through movement. And both propel images past our eyes.

VP/LCT: Influences are both unconscious and conscious. Are there any films or filmmakers whose work has been formative for you?

PV: I remember going to a Pedro Costa Q+A where he kept insisting that the work he did on *Colossal Youth* was no different from what John Ford used to do when directing a western. And, as precedents for MANAKAMANA, there are the obvious influences like Sharon Lockhart, James Benning, Robert Gardner, and Abbas Kiarostami. But I also love things like Henry Fonda square dancing against the backdrop of Monument Valley, so in the spirit of Pedro Costa, I'm going to talk about those sorts of influences.

Stephanie and I were thinking a lot about mixing genres in this film. Not just landscape and portraiture, but also ethnography and science fiction. And they're related. I mean, what is Captain Kirk but a 24th century anthropologist, 'boldly going where no man has gone before' to explore foreign cultures? There's a definite connection between classic sci-fi representations of space travel and our shots of people riding small metallic boxes through the air. Listen for it in the soundtrack, especially.

I was also looking and thinking about films like Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth*, or the car ride that George Clooney takes during the credits of *Michael Clayton* (an otherwise

totally forgettable film -- but watch Clooney's eyes in that last shot!), or the scene in Lisandro Alonso's *Los Muertos* when the protagonist is riding along in the back of a pick-up while it races through the jungle. Of course, these are all very different films from MANAKAMANA, but they capture some of the same shifting consciousness, the sense of watching people think against an unfolding landscape.

SS: For MANAKAMANA, the influential films for me are those of James Benning, especially *13 Lakes* and *10 Skies*; Andy Warhol's Screen Tests and *Blowjob*; and, similar to Benning's work, Sharon Lockhart's films *Nō* and *Pineflat*. *Colossal Youth*, *Vanda's Room*, and *Bones* by Pedro Costa, and *Los Muertos* and *Liverpool* by Lisandro Alonso are similar stylistically and in content and have been extremely influential, as I saw how the mundane could appear mysterious and beautiful in cinema; Sergei Dvortsevov's non-fiction films *Paradise*, *Highway* and *Bread Day* taught me that cross-cultural appreciation didn't require exposition or a complete knowledge of arcane symbolic meaning. In MANAKAMANA, Pacho and I challenged ourselves to take what we love from structural films, and infuse it with a sincere engagement with human subjects, who would nonetheless appear exotic to most audiences.

VP/LCT: What is the relationship between this film and your earlier work, and where does it fit in the evolution of your respective styles?

SS: Rather than fixating on "issues" or extraordinary events, in my films I have been interested in how a person's presence could be evinced through subtle movements and expressions, and perhaps in conveying a sense of "realness" or personhood that could unsettle presumptions about cultural or racial difference and the inequalities they perpetuate. I hope that, if my previous films are about anything, they are about something basic about experience itself, what it feels like to linger in a place with people over time. For this reason, I favored rambling conversations to interviews, and shots that loiter with their subjects, allowing the shots to develop internally as well as within in the larger structure of the film. An implied subject in many of my films is time itself, and how its texture varies as it unfolds over the duration of the moving image and in our lives. For this reason, I have always been interested in long takes and duration. Several of my previous pieces are comprised of 11-14 minute single takes, sometimes handheld, at other times on a tripod. My film *As Long As There's Breath* (2009) was 57 minutes long, and comprised of just 17 shots.

PV: I'm not yet far enough along in my career to discern a path or an evolution beyond the hope that each successive film improves upon the last one. I dig a lot of holes seeding my various interests, and occasionally one sprouts into something worthwhile. A fair bit of my work has been agit-prop-style documentary, and a lot of it has also been co-directed with Harvard anthropologists, but I'm also increasingly branching out into other kinds of film. My next project will be a short 'inaction thriller' starring my grandmother, and I'm in the planning stages of an archival film based on Ronald Reagan's Hollywood years. Both of these projects are a long way from the structural, ethnographic approach of MANAKAMANA. But I'm sure the experience of making this film will filter into future projects.

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

Stephanie Spray

Stephanie Spray is a filmmaker, phonographer and anthropologist whose work explores and exploits the confluence of social aesthetics and art in everyday life. Stephanie is currently a PhD candidate and Teaching Fellow in the Sensory Ethnography Laboratory, housed in the Anthropology Department at Harvard University; has a secondary field in Critical Media Practice; and is a fellow at the Film Study Center. She holds a Master's degree in the study of world religions from Harvard Divinity School and a B.A. from Smith College.

Stephanie Spray Filmography

MANAKAMANA (directed with Pacho Velez, 2013, 118 min.)

UNTITLED (BED) (2009, 9 min.)

MONSOON-REFLECTIONS (2008, 23 min.)

KĀLE AND KĀLE (2007, 51 min.)

Pacho Velez

Pacho Velez's filmmaking sits at the intersection of ethnography, structuralism, and political documentary. His films, though shot in different countries and using distinct formal strategies, each share a preoccupation with local responses to the broad changes wrought by globalization. In 2010, Pacho completed his MFA at CalArts. He now works and teaches between New York and Boston. He is a visiting professor at Bard College, a fellow at the Harvard Film Study Center and an affiliate of the Sensory Ethnography Lab.

Pacho Velez Filmography

MANAKAMANA (directed with Stephanie Spray, 2013, 118 min.)

BASTARDS OF UTOPIA (directed with Maple Razsa, 2010, 54 min.)

ORPHANS OF MATHARE (directed with Randy Bell, 2004, 60 min.)

OCCUPATION (directed with Maple Razsa, 2002, 40 min.)

CREDITS

Directed by Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez

Produced by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel

Camera Operator: Pacho Velez

Sound Recordist: Stephanie Spray

Production Supervisor: Ram Krishna Gandharba

Edited by: Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez

Translation and Subtitles: Stephanie Spray

Post-production Sound: Ernst Karel

Post-production Picture: Patrick Lindenmaier

Cast (in order of appearance): Chabbi Lal Gandharba, Anish Gandharba, Bindu Gayek, Narayan Gayek, Gopika Gayek, Khim Kumari Gayek, Chet Kumari Gayek, Hom Kumari Gayek, Simen Pariyar, Anil Paija, Saroj Gandharba, Bakhraharu, Mithu Gayek, Isan Brant, Mily, Lila Gayek, Bishnu Maya Gayek, 'Kaale' Dharma Raj Gayek, 'Kaale' Ram Bahadur Gayek

Funding: Princess Grace Foundation, The Film Study Center, Fulbright-Hays DDRA, SSRC-IDRF / In-kind Support: The Sensory Ethnography Lab and The Department of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University

Produced at The Sensory Ethnography Laboratory

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