



Manakamana Discussion Guide

Directors: Stephanie Spray & Pacho Velez

Year: 2013

Time: 118 min

You might know these directors from:
MANAKAMANA is the first feature-length film from these directors.

FILM SUMMARY

Located atop the mountainous ridge of the Nepalese river valleys of Trisuli and Marsyangdi is the sacred Hindu temple of the Goddess Manakamana. It's said that the Goddess grants the wishes of those who make the trek to worship her within the mountaintop temple, bringing gifts in tribute and sacrificing animals in her name. Yet, Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, the filmmakers behind the enigmatic ethnographic documentary MANAKAMANA, prefer not to provide this sort of context to viewers of their film.

Running almost two hours in length, yet composed of a mere 11 stationary shots, MANAKAMANA is a rigorously composed work of cinematic portraiture that documents the pilgrimage of various visitors as they ride the gliding cable cars that truck them from the Kurintar at only 258 meters above sea level to the top station at Manakamana Temple at 1302 meters, all in just a span of 10-11 minutes. Each trip is shot head-on from inside the 5x5 cars, extrapolating a range of reactions and emotions, remembrances and encounters, as they interact with their fellow pilgrims or merely take in the awe inspiring views scrolling by as if it was a staged golden age Hollywood rear projection effect.

What makes MANAKAMANA most fascinating is that its restrictive structure forces us to observe the existence of these people, and in doing, we can't help but try to concoct meaning from what little we're given - the clothes they wear, the items they've brought with them, the conversations they have, the facial expressions they present, the people they've chosen to come with. Refreshing in its unique meditation on existence, worship, devotion, technology and generational relations, Spray and Velez's seemingly simple design transcends the mundane by wholly embracing it for all its underscored quirk and vigor.

FILM THEMES

Found within the confinements of the Manakamana cable cars is a portrait of humanity, contemplating our own existence, our relationships to one another, the world around us and one's own spiritual relationships, all via the simple act of watching and waiting.

GENERATIONAL INTERSECTION

The opening frames of MANAKAMANA observe a young boy sitting next to what we might assume is his grandfather or other close family elder. We watch as they sit in silence, assuming that the older man has probably taken this journey by foot for years prior to the construction of the cable cars, while the child will never know the same form of devotion involved in such a pilgrimage. Throughout the film, old and young is suspended in comparison with one another, their reactions to the journey always subliminally commenting on the generational divide.

A STUDY IN OBSERVED EXISTENCE

Comprised of only 11 shots, each lasting about 10-11 minutes long, the film forces the viewer to watch its subjects without any external context. Rather than announcing their intentions, their historical backgrounds or even their relationships with one another, we can only glean information from the expressions on their faces, the movement of their hands, the clothes they wear, the conversations they have and the objects they carry with them. Each carries within them untold stories, unknowable, yet they project an observable existence, suspended and insulated, yet interacting with the world from inside the cable car.

PILGRIMAGE

Whether it be for religious reflection, a duty born out of tradition or strictly for the sake of touristic curiosity, people come from all over the globe to visit the Manakamana Temple. In doing so, their expeditions allows them to meditate on the act of journeying itself, why they've come, and if they've done so before, how the pilgrimage differs from the last. It's also generally a shared experience, meaning that these thoughts often bubble to the surface in contemplative conversations and sometimes humorous observations.

TECHNOLOGY CHANGES RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Before the suspended cable car was built in 1998, pilgrims had to climb for hours (and sometimes days) of steep mountain passes before reaching the holy summit, but now, anyone with a little cash can glide up the mountainside in just 10 minutes, all while documenting the experience on their cell phones and digital cameras. This undeniably transforms not only the experience of making the trek, but also for the temple to become more of a tourist attraction than a sacred place for the devout few.

“Pilgrims are poets who create by taking journeys.”

Richard R. Niebuhr

“We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”

Marcel Proust

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Made up of 11 unbroken shots, the film is very much work of formal structure. What was your reaction to this aspect of the film? What was the purpose of doing this?
2. The film also restricts the viewer to static observation, rather than giving any context to what the people are doing in this cable car doing or why. Why do you think this is? Do you feel compelled to investigate the background of Manakamana?
3. Had you heard of the Goddess Manakamana or the Manakamana Temple before? If not, what is your impression of them?
4. A major theme that tends to surface within the film is the idea of generational intersection. Did you feel that when watching the film? What prompts this idea?
5. Being that there are only a handful of people in the film, why do think the people depicted were chosen? Did anyone stand out to you?
6. Because the film has such a stark formal composition, it tends to come across as a film made up of tiny moments, often physical movements, reactions or merely facial expressions. Where there any moments that stick out in your mind? What were your reactions to them?
7. MANAKAMANA was born out of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab. Are you familiar with this program or its mission? If not, what might you guess, based on seeing this film, are their intentions?
8. Despite the fact that there is basically the same trip happening over again throughout the film, there is a sense of disorientation that occurs with each trip. Did you feel this when watching the film? Where did you think they were going? Up? Down? Or completely separate locales?
9. One of the trips sees a cable car full of goats making their way to the temple. What was your reaction to this shot? What was its purpose?
10. MANAKAMANA is somewhat enigmatic in terms of subject and form, making it somewhat hard to process on an emotional level. How did it make you feel, emotionally?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The camera the filmmakers used, an Aaton 7 LTR, had special significance for them in that it was the same camera used by ethnographic filmmaker Robert Gardner for his 1986 masterpiece FOREST OF BLISS.
- Co-director Stephanie Spray had been working and living in Nepal on and off since 1999, before starting to make films there in 2006.
- A train bound Thai documentary by Sompot Chidgasornpongse called ARE WE THERE YET? served as an inspiration for MANAKAMANA.
- Contrary to what many assume, the filmmakers were indeed both inside the 5'x5' cable car along with the riders, as it was necessary for them to be there to operate the camera, and they also felt it was necessary for their presence to help create on screen tensions.
- The film was shot on 16 mm film because the time that elapses over a 400' magazine is roughly the same as a trip up the mountain in a cable car. You can actually see in one shot that the magazine actually ran out just before the shot descends into complete darkness like the others.
- The Manakamana Temple is in serious need of restoration. Over the years it has suffered from structural damage due to earthquakes and improper drainage. According to officials, it may need to be completely relocated.
- It costs roughly \$2.23 American Dollars for a goat's cable car ride.
- According to legend, the Goddess Manakamana is the reborn wife of the Gorkha king Ram Shah, having ritually self-immolated herself after the mysterious sudden death of her husband.
- Co-director Pacho Velez was selected to help program the Flaherty NYC Winter/Spring 2015 Screening Series at Anthology Film Archives in New York City.
- After its world premiere at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2013, MANAKAMANA received a special mention for Best First Feature, as well as the Golden Leopard for Filmmakers of the Present.
- In 2010, the sacrifice of birds, including pigeons, chicken and ducks, was banned as a means to prevent the outbreak of bird flu.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to learn from its story.
2. **Take** time of your day to reflect and calm your mind through meditation - in many ways, MANAKAMANA is about meditation and how we perceive the world around us.
3. **Help** support the production of films by donating to organizations providing film production grants. MANAKAMANA was funded by various grants, such as the Independent Spirit Grant and the [The Princess Grace Foundation](#).
4. **Delve** into [the programs catalogue](#) of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography program. MANAKAMANA is just one of many wonderful films working in the tradition of the late ethnographic filmmaker Robert Gardner.
5. **Take** a trip to Nepal in hopes of having the Goddess Manakamana grant your wish! Manakamana Temple is desperate need of repair, so tourism in the region is always welcome as a means to boost the potential for restoration work to occur.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.