

New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film
Volume 15 Number 1

© 2017 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/ncin.15.1.49_1

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The serial portrait and coeval time on the cable car up Manakamana mountain

ABSTRACT

1. *This article argues that by framing Manakamana (Spray and Velez, 2013) as a*
 2. *serial portrait, we illuminate the ways that the film situates its Nepalese cable car*
 3. *riders, its American filmmakers and its largely western spectators in an emergent*
 4. *and shared time, and that the sequencing of human subjects that is central to this*
 5. *serial portrait posits an alternative to that once ubiquitous tendency to cast non-*
 6. *western subjects into a time that is past. In 1983's Time And The Other, Johannes*
 7. *Fabian decried the discursive and ideological effects of denying ethnographic subjects*
 8. *their coevalness, but in Manakamana's formal experimentation and its strategic*
 9. *deployment of cinematic homologues and spiritual allegories, a reflexivity emerges to*
 10. *reframe the way representations of people can be organized in time.*

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 12.
 13. Standish Lawder's perfectly formed *Necrology* (1971) is a single-take short film
 14. that features a series of people who passively move through the static frame
 15. from bottom to top in a passage lasting about five seconds. These are in fact
 16. commuters riding an escalator, but with the film printed in reverse, people who
 17. would be descending towards the camera appear to ascend away from it. And
 18. with their backs turned uncannily towards the direction of travel, the sugges-
 19. tion seems to be that these figures are unwittingly moving towards the abrupt

KEYWORDS

portrait film
 serial portrait
 ethnography
 duration
 slow cinema
 allegory



Figure 1: Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, *Manakamana* (2013), USA, 118 min. Courtesy of the artist.

termination of their fleeting lives. This single take is followed by two and a half minutes of credits moving up the screen like the people they describe, and purportedly naming each of the deceased actors, in keeping with the film's title. And while the people in the film are not dead at the time of shooting, many now would be, as is Lawder himself, who also appears. *Necrology* provides a condensed image of the minimalist, serial organization of the cable car passengers found in the feature length *Manakamana* (2014), directed by Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, while also flagging up certain key concerns with film as allegory, film as an agent of death, and film as an encounter between on-screen and off-screen duration. Both films feature passengers floating effortlessly skyward, the cruel suggestion of *Necrology* being that one transits through life in a few seconds, whereas *Manakamana* implies a more leisurely and peaceful journey (Figure 1). Indeed, an extract from a *Time Out* review, printed on the cover of the *Manakamana* DVD, claims: 'You could hardly ask for a more beautiful vision of souls in transit' (Uhlich 2014).

The image of death hovers over both of these films, but in the case of *Manakamana* the Hindu pilgrimage to see the goddess Bhagwati, which lies at the heart of the film, also suggests re-incarnation, as does the looping apparatus of the cable car. Death is also prominently signalled in Paul Arthur's (2002) book chapter on the portrait film, 'No longer absolute: Portraiture in American avant-garde and documentary films of the sixties'. Arthur's citation of the idea that cinema's ability to record the walking, talking image of a person has the capacity to make death 'no longer absolute' presents us with the flipside of Roland Barthes' stipulation that: '[those] who are determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know that they are agents of Death' (1982: 92). If the visual record of a person can render death no longer absolute, to achieve that feat it must nonetheless cast its subject into the realm of the eternal where no person lives. In this light, *Necrology's* little dance with death is an allegory that not only says life is short, but that cinema is an agent of death. While in the form of the religiously framed *Manakamana*, and in the image of the eternally looping passage of the cable car, a different sense of a 'life-time' permeates that text.

1. A brief consideration of *Necrology* helps to situate *Manakamana* in rela-
 2. tion to experimental film practice and provides context for Velez's professed
 3. desire to achieve a 'balance between structuralism and ethnography' in the
 4. film (in MacDonald 2014). Spray and Velez (2016) go on to describe their film
 5. in an interview with *The Seventh Art* as 'part structural, part ethnographic and
 6. part portrait film', this hybridity serving perhaps to disrupt certain filmmak-
 7. ing conventions along with the power relations that can cling to them. In an
 8. effort to understand precisely how these American filmmakers represent their
 9. non-western subjects in a compelling and non-exploitative way, this article
 10. proposes that it is the serial organization, or sequencing, of the film's subjects
 11. in particular that reveals to us the film's politics as much as its aesthetics. For in
 12. this serial organization we find structural forms and temporal frames – notions
 13. of before and after, of young and old, of tradition and modernity, and of life and
 14. death – that are implicated not only in the film's avowed cinematic and spiri-
 15. tual allegories, but also in the idea outlined by James Clifford when he claims that
 16. ethnographic texts are themselves 'inescapably allegorical' (1986: 99).

17. Clifford argues that ethnographic texts 'salvage' cultures from the past
 18. when they bring them into writing (1986: 118) and he demands that the
 19. ethnographer demonstrate an awareness of ethnography's allegorical roots
 20. in particular, via what he calls an 'awareness of narratives, and other tempo-
 21. ral setups implicitly or explicitly at work' (1986: 121). Or as Johannes Fabian
 22. puts it in *Time and the Other* ([1983] 2002), anthropological subjects are too
 23. often denied their 'coevalness', much as Nanook/Allakariallak, despite crea-
 24. tively collaborating with Robert Flaherty in the making of *Nanook of the North*
 25. (Flaherty, 1922), was re-imagined by Flaherty as belonging to the past, before
 26. guns and gramophone records and before the very filmmaking venture they
 27. had just shared. Fabian describes this kind of representation as 'schizogenic'
 28. when he tries to account for the radical discrepancy between anthropologists'
 29. experience of the time of their own practice in the field and their later depic-
 30. tion of time as it relates to the cultural practices that happened concurrently
 31. but whose coevalness is denied ([1983] 2002: 21). It is in such a context that
 32. the serial organization of time in *Manakamana*, coupled with the intimacy of
 33. the film's spatio-temporal frame, becomes central to understanding how the
 34. Americans, Spray and Velez, have crafted their representation of non-western
 35. subjects for largely western audiences without, I suggest, making that encoun-
 36. ter a story about 'us and then'.

37. *Manakamana* and *Necrology* share an interest in people who move through
 38. space while their bodies remain still, echoing the motion/stasis dialectic of
 39. cinematic images themselves. Of course we are all moving through space
 40. when standing still and in that awareness a more cosmological, or even spiri-
 41. tual, sense can also arise from films such as these. Further cinematic homol-
 42. ogies are apparent in *Manakamana* and highlighted by Velez when he says
 43. that 'both motion picture cameras and cable cars are machines that meas-
 44. ure time through movement. And both propel images past our eyes' (Velez in
 45. Castaing-Taylor and Paravel 2014). But where *Necrology* features one unbro-
 46. ken take, *Manakamana* features eleven, each take corresponding to a 400-foot
 47. roll of film which in turn corresponds to the length of time each cable car
 48. takes to journey up or down Manakamana mountain. And just as each car
 49. is connected by cable to all others, so too each long take and its associated
 50. portrait is serially connected to all other takes and portraits in the film. Of
 51. course while portraits come and go within the film, the spectator remains and
 52. serves as a conduit for the larger serial form wherein they become witness to

1. The Sensory Ethnography Lab was formed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor as a collaboration between the Anthropology department and the Visual and Environmental Studies department at Harvard University in 2006 and is well known as an incubator and producer of such non-fiction films as *Sweetgrass* (Castaing-Taylor and Barbash, 2009), *Foreign Parts* (Paravel and Sniadecki, 2010) and *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, 2012). The Lab's ethos is to eschew the influence of journalistic and narrative tendencies in documentary practice in favour of more open ended and aesthetically minded depictions of, and in, place.

a kind of history being made when each individual portrait provides a before and/or after for another portrait within the overall duration of the film. The cable car doesn't just propel images before our eyes, but experiences of past, present and future film time. It is this particular formulation of time and frame that productively aligns spectators, subjects and filmmakers in an evolving and shared durational experience which, in the process, facilitates identification without either denying difference or projecting it into another time. As Velez says (2013), '[m]aybe the film makes an experiential claim that culture is a moving target, but it's a moving target locked inside an enclosed box'.

WHAT IS A SERIAL PORTRAIT?

On the surface, at least, one of the closest contemporary models for *Manakamana* is James Benning's *Twenty Cigarettes* (2011a), which featured in a 2012 exhibition called *The Serial Portrait: Photography and Identity in the Last One Hundred Years* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Indeed, although *Manakamana* presents a pair of subjects twice, like *Twenty Cigarettes* it features portraits of twenty human figures. But because Benning's twenty portraits all feature his friends, the film functions as more of a group portrait, I would argue, where relations of before and after are simply not as significant as the constellation of connections to Benning. When prompted by Benning himself in an interview, the curator Dennis Lim (2011) suggests that the film might even be understood as a kind of self-portrait insofar as this diverse group of friends provides a map of Benning's life journey. The point here is that even when a filmmaker like Benning makes a film with the same basic form as *Manakamana* (a minimalist series of frontal portraits with a pre-determined time-frame but bereft of biography and separated by black), there is very little sense that Benning's film needs to engage with – or would benefit from an engagement with – the ethics of ethnographic film practice or the kinds of temporal-ideological effects that append to such practices. That's also to say, Benning's film produces nothing like the meaning that *Spray* and Velez do in their arrangement of people in a sequence. This is partly because *Spray* and Velez's subjects often talk to one another and narrate their experiences, while Benning's solo sitters almost never talk. Benning is also making a film about friends in America, not people in, and from, a different part of the world.

A more surprising point emerges from the comparison of these two films, however. By living and working in Nepal, and forging not just friendship, but kinship, relations with some of her subjects, *Spray* is also making a film about friends, but in this case in a faraway place among people who belong to a different culture to the one she is most familiar with. Hence it is not the argument of this article that *Spray*'s sensitivity to her subject emerged *because* of the film's serial form, or independently of such basic concerns as knowing your subjects, their language and their land (these are all extremely important). But *Spray*'s relationships to her subjects are backstory and cannot be gleaned from the film. What can be found in the film is temporal relations that at the very least invite spectators to engage the on-screen subjects in the here and now, much as *Spray* and Velez must when they sit just inches away from their subjects in the cramped cable car while conducting filming. In the case of Benning's film, the title suggests that the primary unit of meaning is the individual portrait (of a person smoking a cigarette) and implies that the outcome of the organization of these twenty portraits is a sum rather than a sequence. By comparison, it would not be productive to re-frame *Manakamana* as 'Eleven

1. Cable Car Rides' or 'Twenty Pilgrims'. This difference is crucial and requires
 2. further elaboration.

3. Taking our cues from serial music we might expect that a serial portrait
 4. entails a formal, and quite possibly a procedural, manipulation of certain
 5. parameters over time. In the case of *Twenty Cigarettes* we get the fundamen-
 6. tal framing device of twenty cigarettes and the duration of each, but Benning
 7. does not extend his formalism to the arrangement of the elements of the
 8. sequence itself. Benning does discuss in an interview such human parameters
 9. as younger, older, richer, poorer, male, female, white and not white (2011b),
 10. although it is clear when he is discussing these parameters that Benning is
 11. doing so as a way of reflecting on the diversity within his group of friends,
 12. rather than as a statement about his montage. In *Manakamana*, while each
 13. shot repeats the basic form of all others – static frame moving through space,
 14. uninterrupted takes – the main variables available for manipulation are: the
 15. number of subjects in front of the camera; the changing faces; the direction
 16. of travel, up or down; and the aspect of the camera, facing forwards or back-
 17. wards. The first six shots of the film involve passengers travelling up, while
 18. the last five are journeys down, and thus this choice represents a simple,
 19. detectable structuring device within the film. Of the six journeys up, two
 20. involve people with their backs turned towards the destination, like Lawder's
 21. commuters. But the direction that people face on their journeys does not
 22. represent a parameter that is manipulated in a patterned way. Evidently 36
 23. journeys were filmed (Velez in MacDonald 2014), and according to the film-
 24. makers it was the humanity on show that largely drove their selection and
 25. arrangement; less so a concern with formal patterns or procedures. It is worth
 26. noting Velez's claim that it took him and Spray eighteen months to edit these
 27. eleven shots (Velez 2013). A more procedural approach to editing would
 28. certainly have been the quicker option, but close analysis of the sequence,
 29. especially through the lens of time, does reveal evocative insights and the
 30. advantages for the filmmakers of taking the time they did.

31. In an online interview with Scott MacDonald (2014) Spray suggests that
 32. the first instance of talking in the film, at 25 minutes, is like a shift from act
 33. one to act two. She makes this point as a way of illustrating the film's hybrid
 34. nature – 'acts' being a Hollywood convention – and a more 'playful' structure,
 35. but clearly for her the variable of speech is a significant one. Once talking is
 36. introduced, it is there in every shot, except the last of the upward journeys,
 37. which contains four goats destined for sacrifice. In addition to the goats, the
 38. journeys have one, two, or three humans in the frame (and the two filmmak-
 39. ers outside the frame). We see only one white person, one rooster (twice), and
 40. one kitten who must put up with a joke from its owner about being sacrificed
 41. to the goddess. What is clear from the film is that whilst it has a very formal
 42. structure built around repetition and a fixed frame and shot length, it is much
 43. too interested in the small dramas of its human subjects caught in the inter-
 44. stitial time of their journeys to pursue procedural arrangements or parametric
 45. narration.

46. And yet interesting intersections of the formal and the human emerge.
 47. Spray (in MacDonald 2014) claims that the selection and placement of the
 48. final shot, for example (Figure 2), is motivated by her interest in the idea that
 49. the face of the woman, Gopika Gayek, seems to express 'fulfilment', some-
 50. thing Gopika herself refers to when she tells her husband: 'I'd been wanting
 51. to come for a long time. Now that wish has been fulfilled'. The further interest
 52. for Spray is the idea that this spiritually inflected fulfilment is something she



Figure 2: Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, *Manakamana* (2013), USA, 118 min. Courtesy of the artist.

claims not to have experienced herself, thereby making the shot more compelling for her. But returning to more formal criteria, this shot is the only one in the film where we see subjects who have appeared before. The first time we see them riding the occasionally jarring cable car, there is evident anxiety expressed in the body and face of the frail Gopika, although she does still say 'I've looked forward to this'. Then, as the car arrives at the terminus for the final seconds of their upward journey, Gopika reveals that it took her three days to make the same journey on foot in the past. Each of the shots of this couple acts as a portrait in time, but also as a portrait that creates a past or future for the other. For instance this particular time-span is sharply marked by the facts of life and death, since the rooster that travels up with the couple is alive, but on the return journey appears upside-down with only its feet protruding from the bag it travels in.

What we find in this formal repetition is the humanity Spray attests to, in part because it doubles the time we spend with these particular subjects, thereby giving us more time to consider them as people. Tellingly this couple are not only given the final words in the film, they are also responsible for the first words in the film, which for Spray, as we have seen, signalled an important turning point. The final 50 seconds of the film pass by in darkness, the end of reel artefacts on the film signalling that time has run out. With the sound still running, and credits now rolling, we listen to the final moments of the journey and the film. Gopika asks her husband what the name of the river below them is, before guessing wrongly and then being corrected by him. He says: 'You've been to Kathmandu but don't know this river?' She says 'I forgot. I forgot'. There is an elegance to this ending where the woman's forgetting is married to the loss of the image and, insofar as the past is rendered fragile, it reminds us once again of the present-tense politics of the film. And this entanglement of formal and more human concerns is mirrored when, supplying the first words of the film, Gopika says 'My ears are popping'. Since ears and speech emerge concurrently in the film, and because memory and image also depart concurrently, this couple, who are unique in the film for occupying more than one timeframe, are also

1. framed very distinctly by openings and closings and hence by before and
 2. after. Recalling that portrait films largely eschew biography, and given that
 3. very little is learnt about the subjects in *Manakamana*, I suggest that Gopika
 4. and her husband have a more fully realized backstory because they have
 5. a past within the film; they have appeared before. We find in this instance
 6. a human past emerging via the formalism of the larger and longer serial
 7. portrait, not as a mystical place to banish people to but as a product of the
 8. film's duration.

10. **WE MADE HISTORY ONCE**

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 12. Curiously, there are two journeys in the film that involve passengers who have
 13. ridden the cable car on a previous occasion (not shown in the film). As three
 14. long-haired, young, Nepalese rockers travel upwards, one proclaims: 'You
 15. know we made history here once', evidently because his band brought drums
 16. up to the temple for a concert (Figure 3). His companions express no obvi-
 17. ous interest in this information, perhaps because they played no part in that
 18. history, whereas the later suggestion that they make a music video together in
 19. the cable car is met with more enthusiasm. The preceding shot, involving three
 20. elderly women begins with the words: 'We've been on the cable car before'. In
 21. both of these cases the prior journeys can only be narrated, and unlike the
 22. example above of the couple, they involve separate trips to the mountain, not
 23. simply a single, return journey. But as it happens, in these instances where the
 24. past can only be narrated, we also find small challenges to the idea that the
 25. film's various actors share a common time.

26. In the shot of the three elderly women, one says to the others: 'It would
 27. have been wonderful if our husband had come'. Although the film otherwise
 28. affords an experience where the relationship between subjects and spectators
 29. emerges in a shared time and space, a space whose containment fosters both
 30. a sense of identification and co-presence, here polygamy threatens that sense
 31. of unity insofar as it might seem to belong to another time. But for a specta-
 32. tor tempted to consign the difference represented by these women to another



51. *Figure 3: Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, Manakamana (2013), USA, 118 min.*
 52. *Courtesy of the artist.*

time, there is little in the film that would facilitate such a time-based othering. In this film, otherness, if such there is, is happening now, within unbroken takes or between subjects arranged in a sequence. It is certainly significant for the present discussion that Spray spent years living and working in Nepal and knows many of her subjects well. Those familiar with Spray's biography may also know that one or more of these wives adopted Spray as their own daughter. Spray's biography, therefore, has the potential to act as a bridge between women enacting foreign models of kinship and western audiences brought up amid European mores and laws. But even if we didn't know Spray's story, the spatio-temporal aesthetic of the film works to make any encounter with difference an encounter also with proximity, and in this case, as with others, where we learn so little about the subjects, we are not encouraged to imagine them as belonging anywhere other than in the present, time-bound situation. Indeed when the past is referenced in this shot, it is suggested by one of the women that 'these times seem better'. She continues: 'But no one respects us. Oh well. When I remember the old days, life nowadays seems alright. Back then it was hard to survive'. It is not difficult to understand how life may have become better for these women over time, nor that they might find themselves alienated by these times as well. But the kind of conflict being described here is also apparent in the following shot of the rockers, both shots being different to all others in the way their subjects can attest to a previous experience with the cable car.

Immediately following these three women are the three long-haired rockers who serve as ready signifiers of a time where the elderly women may feel themselves not respected. With the blackness of the transitions between journeys coupled with the homologous form of these groupings of three subjects, there is a sense of the elderly women transmogrifying into the long-haired young men, the next generation. It is not difficult to read the arrangement of this pair of shots as an example of the film creating its own pasts and futures as an effect of montage. Although Spray claims that it is when speech first occurs in the film that it shifts into a new act, I would argue that it is the introduction of these three young musicians that creates the starkest shift in register and tone. For it is when these three arrive – so different to the rest in dress, disposition and purpose – that the earlier shots seem suddenly to take on the quality of providing a context, or point of comparison, for a shot like this one to come. And if this comparison is to be made it is the spectator who must make it by acting as the conduit that connects one interval, shot and portrait to the larger, serial portrait. It is not just the three musicians who arrive with a bang at this moment, but the spectator whose body and attention is the necessary vehicle for the portrait's serial quality to take effect.

In the case of the young musicians we witness something like a clash of cultures when they glide over the heads of some young villagers who yell up at them. The three young men look disconcerted, as though they have been mocked, perhaps for their long hair, or perhaps just for being strangers intruding on the lives of locals. But when one of the musicians asks the character with the kitten what the villagers said, he replies that they are 'losers', before he proceeds to play with his kitten and his own hair, as though these are the signs of what distinguishes him from these 'losers' (as well they might). As spectators we situate ourselves somewhere in this drama, a little judgemental perhaps about the young man's reference to losers, but mindful that the villagers might have been yelling something obscene or nasty. Although the musicians may be seen as the outsiders in this drama, nonetheless the villagers

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Figure 4: Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, *Manakamana* (2013), USA, 118 min. Courtesy of the artist.

represent the only instance in the film where people outside the cable car appear to intrude directly on our understanding of those riding inside. And there is in this exchange a clear sense of the musicians' lofty modernity being contrasted with the rooted-ness of those below, their modernity having also been established by their relation to the old women they succeed in the sequence. The conflict arises, moreover, in a sequence where a lack of respect has been foreshadowed in the previous shot and where our reading of this group of young men is uniquely influenced by people who do not belong to the sequence at all. Tracing these kinds of threads helps to illuminate the ways that time is articulated in the film's serial structure whilst revealing the film's awareness both of its own narratives and those of ethnographic filmmaking more broadly.

IT'S FINE FOR YOU TO EAT LIKE A CHILD

In the much remarked upon ninth journey of *Manakamana*, involving an elderly woman and her middle-aged daughter – the latter appearing in Spray's 2010 film *As Long As There's Breath* – there is again some potential to see a certain conflict of cultures situated in time. The elderly woman, Bishnu Maya, particularly struggles in the heat of the cable car to stop her ice-cream dripping down her chin, down her arm and onto her dress (Figure 4). The daughter jokes 'We didn't get milk as children', to which her mother replies, 'That's why we don't know how to eat this'. The two women look at each other and laugh at their predicament before the daughter says to her mother in a curious age reversal: 'We're like children still learning how to eat. It's fine for you to eat like a child. But I'm a grown woman'. The audience for a 'festival' film like this one, produced under the auspices of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab,¹ is a particular kind of film-going audience capable of seeing in the film's *presentational* aesthetic, deep structures and extended metaphors, an approach to the representation of non-western subjects that seeks to avoid didacticism, condescension and a denial of its subjects' coevalness. But one of the things that makes this scene

1. The Sensory Ethnography Lab was formed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor as a collaboration between the Anthropology department and the Visual and Environmental Studies department at Harvard University in 2006 and is well known as an incubator and producer of such non-fiction films as *Sweetgrass* (Castaing-Taylor and Barbash, 2009), *Foreign Parts* (Paravel and Sniadecki, 2010) and *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, 2012). The Lab's ethos is to eschew the influence of journalistic and narrative tendencies in documentary practice in favour of more open ended and aesthetically minded depictions of, and in, place.

interesting and funny is precisely its focus on subjects whose power and control diminishes before our eyes, and whose behavior could be seen to fail certain tests of public civility, or, as they put it, of adulthood. Crucially, these two aspects, while interimplicated, map onto the temporal matter at hand in distinct ways. That is, in the first instance the women's power and control falls away in the present tense, in a coequal setting. Whereas any sense that these women might be seen as failing to adequately present themselves before western eyes depends on an idea that they are different. And if they are different they were different before the film started. *Manakamana* is a film that understands that difference is real, but also that difference, like culture, is not fixed.

It seems clear to me that *Manakamana* strives to make its audience contend with any issues of representation as matters arising substantially in the present tense, but it can only do so much to overcome the hard-wired nature of its audience's collective, colonialist learning. Consider the following anxieties that a spectator *could* have about this scene and the way they depend on certain assumptions that the film itself actively works against:

- People from other cultures seem not to observe our sense of propriety when in public, let alone when on camera.
- What we are witnessing is in fact the exploitation of the subjects' naivety in the full glare of western eyes.
- The spiritual concerns of a pilgrimage seem to have given way to the corrupting forces of tourism and consumption.

Items two and three on this list are very different objections to the first. The first is an image of bigotry, or ignorance, while the second reflects an anxiety about representation in the face of difference, and the third, a desire to uphold perceived cultural traditions – a salvage mentality. Spray's education and her familiarity with her subjects means she is not ignorant, which allows her to not be anxious about difference, and not to be precious about a past where her subjects do not live. The reason for constructing imaginary spectators here – spectators who read this scene differently to the way the filmmakers might hope – is to try to show how the filmmakers address an audience through their construction of a shared space and time in particular. Put differently, if there is a spectator out there who would balk at the messy ice-cream eating, they would almost certainly balk at the eleven minute take itself, the latter serving only to exacerbate the aggravation of the former, since it conforms to the logic that nothing happens in Slow Cinema.

Ivonne Margulies (1996: 21) stresses that a slow cinema where 'nothing happens' is deemed slow when events depicted don't warrant the time accorded them. Failing to adequately deal with an ice-cream would be one such event. But of course the point of slow cinema is to create space for other kinds of cinematic events and modes of engagement. While *Manakamana* may be slow, the duration of each shot is a direct function and literal translation of the journey content, and that correlation is suggestive of deep allegorical concerns and experimental practices. In this scene, what emerges very strongly is a sense that if time is shared then an experience can be shared. We spend so much time with the women and their dripping ice-creams, in other words, that we share in the real-time dilemma of it such that *the fact of ice-creams dripping* is likely to become our focus, rather than a sense of propriety or politics.

1. *Manakamana* has an echo in early cinema's ride films and ice-cream is
 2. suggestive of the carnival or fun-fair. But by putting non-European subjects
 3. at the centre of the film, Velez and Spray also alert us to the film's place
 4. in a cinematic lineage that includes not only so called 'primitive cinema'
 5. but also the primitivist ethnographies of the time. It is the familiarity of
 6. these historical tropes, and even their proximity in this case, that alerts
 7. us to the film's different, more transnational gaze. Although part of this
 8. transnationalism may be located in the filmmakers' familiarity with both
 9. their subjects and the foreign location, this alone will not distinguish their
 10. ambitions from earlier, colonial enterprises. Amongst the other tests for a
 11. 'transnational cinema', according to Vijay Devadas, is the idea that such a
 12. cinema ought to involve an 'affirmation of difference' (2006). Certainly this
 13. film affirms difference, but such an affirmation can already be found in
 14. the ice-cream eating women themselves, as it does when the middle aged
 15. daughter affirms that it is okay for her elderly mother to make a mess, but
 16. quite another for a 'grown up' like herself to do so. In this jokey infantilization
 17. of her elderly mother, the daughter communicates both a distance
 18. on the matter ('it's fine for you') while simultaneously ruing the coupling
 19. ('we're like children'). Similarly, the lack of concern in the elderly woman is
 20. in equal parts an opportunity for us to feel distance from her (perhaps she
 21. should feel more self-conscious) or to identify with her predicament (we've
 22. all been there). And in this kind of filmmaking, where culture is a 'moving
 23. target' and where each portrait is framed by all others, such matters are
 24. rightly left for the audience to do with them what they will. But there can
 25. be no mistake that *Manakamana* wants its audience to enjoy the ride as it
 26. evolves in time, and to eschew the temptation to salvage, or journey into,
 27. the ideologies or practices of the past.

28. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of this sticky trip the younger
 29. woman waits 90 seconds before announcing that they can start eating their ice-
 30. creams, having presumably told the older woman to wait for her instruction.
 31. One can only imagine that the reason for the delay was to consume the ice-
 32. creams away from prying eyes, an idea supported by the fact that the younger
 33. woman also stops eating her ice-cream and folds it into her plastic bag just
 34. before they reach the lower terminus, even though she has not finished it. But
 35. if the issue is one of privacy, a distinction appears to have been made between
 36. potential public witnesses on the mountain and the film's witnesses in the
 37. cinema, although the latter concern is mediated by the fact that the women
 38. know Spray, her familiar face perhaps acting as a scrim that obscures the spec-
 39. tatorial gazes that lie beyond.

40. There is a danger that a scene like this one could lend itself to a read-
 41. ing wherein the twin influences of colonialism and global capitalism appear
 42. to have robbed a once-authentic journey of its spiritual heart by transport-
 43. ing the participants from an idealized past to a mundane modernity where
 44. they don't quite belong and don't know how to behave. The problem with
 45. this reading, of course, is that it relies on the denial of the subjects' coeval-
 46. ness. It depends on an idea that these subjects properly belong to an earlier
 47. time and have become awkwardly transposed, much as *Nanook of the North*
 48. (1922) – a 'proto-portrait' according to Arthur (2002: 96) – features a faux-
 49. naïve Nanook biting into a gramophone record as he tries to make sense
 50. of the contemporary world. But the time of this individual portrait, to say
 51. nothing of its place within the larger serial composition, is the time of the
 52. journey, the time of the film reel and the time of the ice-cream. Considered

within the larger series, this shot attests not to a time before now where an authentic Nepal persists, but precisely to a contemporary moment wedged between a shot of two young women with cameras and water bottles and two older musicians who play their violin-like sarangis for the final six minutes of their ride. Since these two men are also the subjects of Spray's 2007 film *Kāle and Kāle*, it is likely that Spray not only asked them to play their instruments but even invited them to ride the cable car for just this purpose. When read through the filter of Spray and Velez's reflexive temporal setups, rather than through ethnography's received allegories, the dripping ice-cream becomes little more than a ticking metaphor designed to keep us all in the moment.

CONCLUSION

I have argued here that the rhetorical and affective structures of *Manakamana* are such that the time that really matters in the film is contained wholly within it; both within its shots, but especially within the larger montage. I maintain this claim even in the face of – or in fact because of – the film's central conceit which is to feature a certain kind of cultural intersection where religiously and ethnically inscribed pilgrims float through space in an Austrian designed cable car, a gesture that echoes David MacDougall's description of anthropology as a discipline that traverses cultural realities and is always on the verge of the surreal (1991: 2). But the value of *Manakamana*'s cultural intersection lies precisely in the way it traces vectors of experience and culture that are coeval.

Fabian suggests that 'our past is present in us as a project, hence as our future' ([1983] 2002: 93). So if the portrait film favours a present-tense and literal brand of performativity, it also sheds light on the way subjects negotiate the past and the present simultaneously. Each of *Manakamana*'s long takes are projects in an unfolding present that is actualized by the body of the spectator in whose presence each shot also provides a past and future orientation for all other shots in the sequence. One doesn't want to deny the fact that the historical world is a force in the film, nor to overstate the general case. But returning to the image of souls in transit, there is an abiding sense in *Manakamana* of subjects floating free of the historical world perhaps because, confined as they are on their fixed journey, time is all there is. The fact that the elderly mother eating the ice-cream died a year after being filmed returns us finally to the idea that film is an agent of death, not least when portraiture threatens to fix a person's image and thereby render death 'no longer absolute'. But unlike the individual portrait, the serial portrait also reminds us that each of us is yet one more commuter riding the car, less an embalmed image than a moment in time.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

40. Tarrant, P. (2017), 'The serial portrait and coeval time on the cable car up
41. Manakamana mountain', *New Cinemas*, 15:1, pp. 49–62, doi: 10.1386/
42. ncin.15.1.49_1

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