Filming with (or without) a tripod

Hölsgens, S.; Vannini, P.

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FILMING WITH (OR WITHOUT) A TRIPOD

Sander Hölsgens

"Rule 6: Don't use a tripod." I'm dozing away somewhere at the back of a classroom. It's an autumn afternoon. I look out the window and see some fellow students reading in the cold but sharp sunlight. The words start to sink in. *No tripod? What kind of rule is this?* My focus returns to the classroom. *This is anti-cinema, and everyone should know about it.* I raise my hand and ask, somewhat upset, about the whys and hows of this rule. The professor responds,

If you use a tripod, you cannot make a good observational film. If you're filming handheld, you can follow your interlocutor as they go about their day. But if you're using a tripod, you're constantly focused on setting up and moving the camera, and miss many of the activities unfolding in front you.

It's 2013, and I'm completing a degree in visual anthropology. Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's *Manakamana* has just premiered at the New York Film Festival. The ethnographic film portrays a cable car ride in Nepal's Gandaki province. Each scene is filmed with a tripod-mounted camera. My peers and I are enthralled. We're not used to this radical kind of static, durational imagery. For one of our first film assignments, we film a photographer who is setting up his first solo exhibition. We use a tripod to look—to really look—at the ways in which he hangs the pictures and prepares for the grand opening. It is like seeing a mathematician at work: his precise and analytical methodology vibrates in the stillness of our imagery. We know that the use of tripods may affect our grades. When we show our piece, a few weeks later, most lecturers support our experimentation. But one of them, the rule giver, says they almost fell asleep: there was not enough context or movement, resulting in a boring film.

In this chapter, I attend to the role of tripods in ethnographic film, a subject usually covered in instruction manuals. The goal is to provide readers a framework for understanding a diversity of ways in which tripods might be used. I start by tracing two pivotal moments in the history of ethnographic cinema: Robert Flaherty's peculiar use of tripods in *Nanook of the North* (1922) and Margaret Mead's (1975) famous statements on stationary cameras. Subsequently, I highlight recent work to give an insight into the processes and meanings of using tripod-mounted cameras. Finally, I draw connections with adjacent fields such as slow cinema and structural film. I write this chapter with the belief that broadening our discourse on film language can enrichen the methodologies we develop in our disciplines. The point is not to make an argument for or against tripods—there

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will be no rules in this chapter—but rather to zoom in on this weird, unwieldy, antiquated (and yet sometimes useful) piece of technology.

The meanings of tripods: Authenticity, preservation, creativity

Robert Flaherty's famed *Nanook of the North* (1922) chronicles a season in the lives of an Itivimuit family in Quebec. As much as the film makes a claim to a discourse of authenticity (Rony, 1996), some of its scenes have been dramatized and reconstructed "to enhance the film's visual and narrative impact" (Bernardi, 1996, p. 301). In fact, it is a sponsored project. Révillon Furs, which has an interest in the fur trade, contributed financially and gave Flaherty access to a fur post for the production of the film (cf. Flaherty, 1922; McLane, 2022). Practically, Flaherty used a wooden tripod to operate an Akeley camera weighing about 60 pounds: "[T]hese cameras fascinated me because they were the first cameras ever made to have a gyro-movement in the tripod-head whereby one could tilt and pan the camera without the slightest distracting jar or jerk or vibration" (Manvell, 1950, p. 13). The result is a salvage ethnography in which the tripod is a tool affording access to a reality that is on the brink of disappearance (Marcus, 2006, p. 208).

Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) links the film to taxidermy. In 1920s Northern America, the onlooking, white intelligentsia craved the possibility to witness or study Indigenous peoples, then considered "vanishing cultures," in the flesh. Film was considered a medium *par excellence* to do so: the imagery enabled spectators to carefully observe and analyze how people behave and move. Just like taxidermy was a way to study unfamiliar animals, moving images were seen as a way of recording, preserving, and memorializing the Other. As Rony (1996, p. 102) describes: "[I]n order to make a visual representation of indigenous peoples, one must believe that they are dying as well as use artifice to make a picture which appears more true, more pure." The tripod gave an aesthetic legitimacy to this form of salvage anthropology: it instilled the impression of factuality and realism. The mathematical precision of tripod-based recordings encouraged a positivist spectatorship: this worked as a "true" documentation of a near-extinct people. What was at stake was not the psychology or individuation of Flaherty's interlocutors, but rather how they stood in for an entire community. For this reason, *Nanook of the North* is often screened in visual anthropology courses to discuss the relationality between nonfiction imagery and the real (McLane, 2022).

As cameras became smaller and easier to operate, the mechanical reliance on tripods decreased. This proved to be a breeding ground for observational cinema, a genre that aims "to offer the audience direct access to the material presented, to see what the filmmaker has seen, so that they could form their own conclusions about it" (Henley, 2020, p. 289). Moving away from "directorial authority," as Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009, p. 540) write, observational films "*follow* from extended, long-term relationships rather than that relationships would function instrumentally as vehicles for 'getting' the film." Epistemologically, observational films reveal "the context in which ethnographic understanding is generated" (Postma, 2021, p. 119). While the use of tripods prevailed—especially to record establishing shots and interviews—observational filmmakers increasingly used handheld shots to communicate to their audience that they truly were there and built a relationship with their interlocutors (Schneider & Wright, 2021). Their presence is therefore intensely felt at all times, from the jittery camera movements to the proximity of their voice. Handheld cinematography—in ethnographic films and film movements like the French New Wave—underscores an attempt to foster a sense of embodiment, reflexivity, and subjectivity.

These technological advancements fostered various debates about the ethnographer's use of cameras gear. Margaret Mead was one of the most vocal adversaries of handheld filmmaking,

advocating for a renewed appreciation of the tripod as a methodological tool. In an essay published in Paul Hockings' *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, Mead (2003) describes the dissonance between film as a source of information and film as a subjective representation of experience:

> If tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed. The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not turned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen.
>
> (p. 9)

During a conversation that would later become notorious, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (1977) argued over the use of the tripod. For Mead, the tripod allows the ethnographer to show what truly happened. Her vision for the future is a 360° camera mounted to a tripod: this set-up, Mead writes (1975, p. 9), "will make it possible to preserve materials . . . for training students long after the last isolated valley in the world is receiving images by satellite." For Mead, in essence, handheld filmmaking creates a barrier between the experience of the ethnographer and the material the spectator has access to. Bateson, on the other hand, thinks the tripod renders the cinematic modality fairly useless: "You're talking about putting a dead camera on top of a bloody tripod. It sees nothing," he noted (p. 79).

More recently, the tripod has been resurrected as a creative ethnographic tool. Take the experimentation with film form at Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab. "Averse to scientific jargon and ignoring what they view as the limiting do's and don'ts of the profession," Eye Filmmuseum curator Eva Langerak (2024, n.p.) writes, "they seek to connect with the audience." Most famously, this includes the use of action cameras in *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor & Paravel, 2012) and a self-made, tiny camera in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (Castaing-Taylor & Paravel, 2022). But this extends to a revaluation of the tripod, too. In *Single Stream* (Wojtasik et al., 2014), the stillness of the tripod is shred asunder by the raving imagery of a recycling factory. Unlike Mead's desire for truthful information, Wojtasik, Lee, and Karel turn static imagery into an immersive experience. Or take Jeff Silva and Vic Rawlings's *Linefork* (2016). Here, the tripod is a device inviting spectators to pay close attention to the long takes disclosing the daily lives of elderly people in a Kentucky mountain town (Hölsgens, 2018a).

In sum, what started off as a necessity for films like *Nanook of the North* is now turning into a tool for experimentation. Christian Suhr (2018, p. 390) even goes so far as to see how the tripod makes the camera a "seer in its own right," giving it its own agency. In the following, I give a range of examples of how ethnographic filmmakers are using tripods in their work today. These films show that a tripod can be an homage, a reflexive gesture, a structuring device, and a political tool.

Examples: Tripod aesthetics and politics

Stephanie Spray's Record *(2018)*

For a special online issue, *Cultural Anthropology* invited five anthropologists to share how they use images in their ethnographic work. They were asked,

> What form of understanding do images afford? How might images enable the anthropologist to access other worlds and forms of thought? What is an anthropology of or through the image? And what might engaging images as method or object contribute to contemporary anthropology?
>
> (Seale-Feldman, 2018, n.p.)

Four respondents submitted a textual entry. But Stephanie Spray's response was composed of a single take lasting about four minutes. *Record* (2018) opens with the soundscape of an airplane: monotonous, low-frequency tones that disappear as quickly as they become audible. Then, we see a woman. She looks at the camera and smiles when filmmaker Spray walks into the frame and sits down besides her. The woman—Seti—laughs and asks, "Is it going *there*? The picture of us sitting here?" She gestures at the camera. "Yes," Spray responds. "Want to see? Go take a look. Take a minute to look." They walk toward the camera and look through its viewfinder. We spectators are left with somewhat of an abandoned *mis-en-scène*: what's left are two cups of tea, two wooden chairs, two reed baskets, two drawings, and a little cupboard. It's an unusual scene for a visual ethnography. Instead of action, the film focuses on inaction, or the kind of action that's not rendered visible by the camera apparatus. After about half a minute, Spray walks back into the frame. Seti responds in amazement: "Oh, Mother! This is how it comes out. . . . Love, you look beautiful!"

Watching the film, spectators may infer that Spray had planned to record an interview with Seti as a part of a more substantive film project. For all we know, this scene is the kind of conversation filmmakers and interlocutors have before formally starting to record. But, as the film's title suggests, this *is* the record. The unscripted chat about the inner workings of the camera have profound repercussions. For starters, the traditional academic roles have reversed. Seti, an interlocutor, ends up looking through the viewfinder, carefully observing what's visible in the frame. Spray, an anthropologist, becomes the subject of the composition. The moment Seti returns to the frame and sits down next to Spray, she says, "It is exactly like the real you there. Your smile is right there. I saw it. It saw it very well, love." What's indicative of Spray's presence on camera is her smile, an emotive or even spiritual form of affect (Orlowska et al., 2023). To Seti, the camera documents a lived reality, one in which affects like smiles have an indexical quality.

Cinematic duration allows for a contemplative form of spectatorship. We look, to borrow Danni Zuvela's (2004) words, *into*, rather than *at*, places and people. More specifically, *Record*'s fixed camera elicits rapport. In the context of four minutes and a precisely composed frame, we see not only the trust between Spray and Seti but also their warm and loving mode of communication, their humor, their emplacement. In an interview about her teaching philosophy, Spray (CU Boulder, 2018) says, "It's less about going and getting B-roll, but it's all about establishing relationships." In *Record*, this is facilitated by the tripod. The single take, recorded by an unoperated camera, insists on the importance of taking your time: for building relationships, for attuning to a place's atmosphere, for learning about the mechanical qualities of recording devices.

As spectators, we have to work a bit harder: rather than relying on montage or contextual information, we have to lean into these images to make sense of them. Our eyes navigate the frame, seeking significance among stillness and a prolonged temporality. But, as Nikolaj Lübecker and Daniele Rugo (2019, p. 9) write, having to work harder as an audience "means at the same time being able to surrender to the uneventfulness of the image." Enduring the passing of time encourages spectators to harmonize with their perceptual faculties by listening, looking, and feeling more intently. Whereas Margaret Mead's utopia of an all-seeing, fixed camera orbits around fact finding, Spray's application of the static single take communicates affect. *Record* shows how tripods carry no intrinsic use case, but rather have the generative potential to disclose rapport, reflexivity, and relationalities.

Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's Manakamana *(2012)*

Stephanie Spray's work has been mentioned in one breath with American experimental filmmakers such as James Benning, Peter Hutton, and Sharon Lockhart (see MacDonald, 2013; Tarrant, 2017).

Indeed, these artists all share a methodology consisting of an extended period of looking, listening, and observing, resulting in long takes recorded from a fixed perspective. Some have defined this approach as a kind of slow cinema (De Luca, 2016). *Record* neatly fits in this genre: it favors contemplative spectatorship over narrative progression or montage (Çaglayan, 2018). Some of Spray's other work is not just slow but also borders on a structural mode of cinema or an approach "in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film" (Sitney, 1974, p. 407).

Take *Manakamana* (2012). Here, filmmakers Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez place a fixed camera inside a cable car. But it's not just any camera or cable car. The latter is a transit to a Hindu temple in Gorkha, an area associated with the foundation of modern Nepal. Each journey takes just over ten minutes, or about the length of a 400-foot film reel (Pinkerton, 2015). What's more, Spray and Velez borrowed the 16mm camera anthropologist Robert Gardner used to film *Forest of Bliss* (1986): an Aaton 7 LTR. But rather than mimicking Gardner's fluid and embodied camera movements, each ride is filmed from a tripod.

The result? Eleven poignant portraits. Akin to *Record*, the tripod is not used to document as much information as possible, only for it to be analyzed in the editing suite. Rather, spectators are invited to look at and listen to—really look at and listen to—the subjects' rite of passage, including their private interactions, their responses to the beautiful landscape, and their bodily engagement with the cable car. What makes this not just a slow mode of filmmaking but a structural approach to cinema is the link between the affordances of the camera and the filmmakers' aesthetic choices. Or, as Spray puts it:

> We became conscious of the parallels between the two technologies, their related evolutions, and the constellation of associations they might produce. There was also the parallel of the frame of the film image and the framing of the landscape by the cable-car windows—both motion pictures—with viewing spectators coming along and marveling at the ride.
>
> (MacDonald, 2014, n.p.)

The film's structure results in a dialectic of masking and unmasking. We, as spectators, never get to see the Hindu temple or the top of the mountain. Instead, we join the passengers (whether they are pilgrims, tourists, or cattle) during a rite of passage. Temporarily closed off from the world, they take in the natural landscape. An elderly lady expresses how she used to walk for hours to reach the mountaintop; three male musicians continuously take selfies against the backdrop of the environ; yet another passenger comments on the ways her ears pop as the cable car reaches high altitudes. What's disclosed is the kind of motivation behind visiting the temple. What remains nebulous is the outcome of the pilgrimage, its rituals and practices. What's more, the people we join on the way up are never seen again. Consequently, we never find out whether the journey lived up to the expectations expressed inside the cable car.

Manakamana lacks resolve or consolation. Instead, there's complexity and ambiguity. The rite of passage is commercialized; the wild landscape is made accessible through human design; the tripod obscures the absence/presence of the filmmakers. The time each journey takes allows for a contemplative viewing, as much as it engenders friction and uncertainty: Whom will we see next? What's their purpose? Is it OK to feel a sense of exhaustion or tedium? While *Record* is a neatly packaged portrait of an encounter in a confined space, *Manakamana* is constantly on the move. Not only in the sense that the cable car moves but also given the constant change in protagonists, weather conditions, and sensibilities. Some transits are ritualistic, others hilarious, yet others agonizing. The tripod here tirelessly records this coming and going—demanding from

spectators a consideration as to "what it means to contemplate duration through duration itself" (Conley, 2019, p. 130).

Tripods as a politic: Tacit Traces, Touching Absence, and Reverberations

Showing *Record* and *Manakamana* to anthropology students elicits three main responses. First, some students consider the single take wildly radical and creative. When you are intimately familiar with fast-paced montage (including the pacing of social media content), an 11-minute take can feel decidedly revolutionary. These films challenge students to slow down, observe, and reconsider the tools they use. Second, a few students highlight these films in their theses as examples of a reflexive kind of ethnographic cinema. These students write about the ways in which stillness and duration foreground the social dynamics amongst the filmed subjects. Third, a few students get annoyed or exhausted by the films' pacing while others consider it a relief to take a breather. During in-class discussions, students suggest that this may be linked to societal expectations of efficiency, hard work, and multitasking. So using a tripod can be a political tool to address contemporary issues, as two of my former students in visual ethnography show.

Simone Loth's *Tacit Traces* (2021, n.p.) "illustrates how interrelated and conflicting narratives of self-identification as mixed-race raise issues about intergenerational trauma from the past and its emotional impact on the present." The film traces how family members engage with everyday racism and the notion of inherited silence. The tripod here enables the filmmaker not only to record herself via diary-style vlogs but also to rethink how race and power shape her thinking on the body and the senses. The tripod becomes a lens representing a society's onlook, at once exoticizing and objectifying. Loth's narrative intimacy can be understood as a feminist sensory ethnography, which aims "to encourage further experimentation as part of a new wave of films exploring ways to bring approaches of care, collaboration, and multiple subjectivities from margin to center" (Guzman & Hong, 2022, p. 192). The fixed camera is a modality to critically engage the filmmaker's positionality, both as author of a story on a family history and a member of that family, within a discipline "with colonial baggage *and* liberatory potential" (p. 188).

Flore Hoekstra's *Touching Absence* (2021, n.p.) "is a sensory exploration of the phenomenon of *huidhonger*: the intense desire for touch." Set against the backdrop of COVID-19 lockdowns in the Netherlands, the film chronicles the story of three millennials. For an extended period of time, they cannot meet up with or touch others, resulting in a sensation of *huidhonger*: a "skin hunger." Influenced by Laura Marks's (1999) conceptualization of haptic visuality, Hoekstra produces imagery that makes palpable a sensation no longer available to subjects and spectators alike. Close-ups of tree barks, murals, and human skin are interwoven, evoking the sensation of touch, and contrasted with tripod-based talking heads. These interviews are filmed from a distance, as they were recorded during a moment in time when everyone who didn't live with others needed to keep a 1.5-meter distance. The stillness of the imagery represents the effects of lockdowns on human interaction: whereas the close-ups are sensuous and affective, the carefully composed frames are cold and distanced.

Retrospectively, both *Tacit Traces* and *Touching Absence* left deep impressions on my own work. Between 2013 and 2018, I conducted fieldwork amongst a skateboarding crew in Seoul, South Korea. My principal interest was how this small group of skaters perceive, imagine, and represent public space. This resulted in two films. *VCR* (2017) is an essay film based on the audiovisual material skaters and I collectively made, while *Reverberations* (2018) zooms in on the ecology of three skateparks, all of which are located in contested public spaces. Many of my interlocutors turned to mini DV cameras from the late 1990s to record their trick play. By using fisheye lenses and riding alongside their skating subjects, filmers can do so within an arm's length of trick

play, resulting in an aesthetic of spectacle: razor-sharp movements, intense sound recordings, and a disorienting relationality to place. What spectators see is a fast montage of tricks against a backdrop of mostly unrecognizable urban space (Hölsgens, 2024).

My ethnographic film *Reverberations* offers a counterpoint to this approach. It consists of long takes, all of which are filmed using a tripod. In terms of its pacing and subject matter, *Reverberations* is unlike most other nonfiction films on skateboarding. Instead of interviews or other types of conventional exposition, spectators familiarize themselves with these skateparks through cinematic duration. The film responds to my interlocutors' own articulation of these sites as *jibs*: home-like environs. To these skaters, skateparks offer a temporary escape from the societal pressures they experience in their daily lives. These are liminal spaces, existing somewhere between the public and private, allowing for a microcosm with its own rules and codes of conduct.

Reverberations was the outcome of approximately 20 months of fieldwork. During the first few months, I spent six to ten hours a day in or in proximity to the three skateparks. In line with participant observation, I used this time to skate alongside fellow skaters, performing a "rolling ethnography" (McDuie-Ra, 2023; Hölsgens & Glenney, 2025). My emphasis was on sensory data: how my participants move through and make sense of these spaces, how the skateboard becomes a medium for exploring the city, and how skaters acquire skills to perform situated tricks. As soon as I realized that my fieldnotes were echoing those of a few months earlier, I freed up three weeks to film *Reverberations*: one week for each skatepark. By the time I started filming, the skate crews were used to my presence and had consented to taking part in my research. If anything, I was considered a skater among skaters.

By focusing on the skateparks' serene affects, layered textures, and rhythmic plurality, the film replaces a dominant discourse of the spectacle with a formal turn to duration. Using a tripod was generative in three ways. First, the formal limitation to structure an ethnographic film around long takes, shot with a tripod, reduced the hours of material I recorded. While students in visual anthropology are often taught to record at a 1:50 or 1:100 ratio (meaning a 30-minute film requires between 25 and 50 hours of footage), my method meant that every shot would count. It starts with a prolonged period of listening and looking, delaying the use of the camera. As a result, the filmed sequences resonate with activities, routines, and rhythms I had observed before; they were, in some ways, reverbs of situations my interlocutors and I had experienced before.

Second, some of my participants were skeptical about my film project. They did not understand why I wouldn't use a handheld camera and fisheye lens, especially since I am a long-term skater myself. Many of my participants were hoping the project would lead to a high-quality video compilation of tricks, rather than durational shots of people stretching, cleaning their shoes, and falling asleep in a skatepark. However, discussing a rough cut elicited unexpected insights: interlocutors started chatting about the look and feel of the skateparks, not in terms of their skateability, but rather as public spaces. Many commented on the footage of civil workers who clean, maintain, and repair the skate obstacles, as well as elderly people who use the parks for early-morning workouts. These comments, in turn, fostered many a conversation on South Korea's faltering welfare state, including how some of my interlocutors consider the country a hell-like environment for youth. The slowness of the imagery, my interlocutors commented, was perceived as an antidote to the *pali-pali* (literally, fast-fast) cadence of their everyday, modern life. Instead of a rush—as is the case in the neoliberal ethic of work and sport—stillness and slowness can elicit a mode of reflection, contemplation, and empathy (Gronstad, 2016). Tripod-based imagery, then, can be a critique of the modern (and modernity's) obsession with speed, following traditions like slow living, slow cooking, and slow academia.

Finally, *Reverberations* primarily appealed to an audience outside skate culture and visual anthropology. Most screenings were affiliated with activities, seminars, and festivals in fine arts,

architectural history, and experimental film. During Q&As, most respondents focused on film form and spectatorship, rather than an anthropology of the senses or urban sports. The point here is that a tool like a tripod can radically alter a film's discourse. Unlike screenings at anthropology departments and conferences, these arts and film spaces allowed for meaningful chats about the "intolerable duration" (De Luca, 2016, p. 28) of the long take. In short, the tripod proves to be a meaningful addition to the ethnographer's toolkit, not just in terms of field recordings but also as an elicitation technique, a phenomenology of spectatorship, and a socially engaged politic.

Conclusion

Tripods are clumsy and alluring tools. They limit the camera's mobility as much as they demand the filmmaker's creativity. For decades, the tripod was a logistical necessity for anyone engaged in the production of moving images. The advent of handheld filmmaking in the 1960s coincides with the observational turn—an ethnographic attempt to "cede control of the film" and follow interlocutors as they go about their lives (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009, p. 540). Handheld, observational filmmaking offered a critique of positivist understandings of the camera apparatus. As a result, the tripod was made suspect, as if it belonged to an anthropology of the past.

More recently, ethnographic filmmakers turn to tripods for creative, political, and reflexive purposes. This includes employing the tripod to record extended long takes, push an auto-ethnographic aesthetic, and challenge the hierarchical relationship between anthropologist and interlocutor. Rather than a technological determinist reading, the ethnographic filmmakers highlighted in this chapter consider tripods as tools with diverse, situated meanings. What is more, many of my current students experience a freshness and creative liberation when engaging with tripod-based imagery. For future research (and teaching), this may mean this kind of approach gains even more momentum among ethnographic filmmakers who counter immersive technologies. Perhaps, then, the antiquated tripod becomes once again a locus for radicality and vigor.

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