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Immensity

By *Austin Lord*

12-15 minutes

Kesang Tseten's *Trembling Mountain* (2016) is a film about disorientation, uncertainty, uneven processes of reorientation, and the work it takes to make afterlives possible in Nepal. Tseten and his team follow the Langtangpas, the people of the Langtang Valley, from the early aftermath of the 2015 earthquake to a point in time a little more than a year after the disaster—when reconstruction is underway and Gyalpo, the main character, is able to begin making yak cheese again. The film finds a way of documenting the indescribable; it is a careful and honest depiction of the complexity, confusion, and vitality of the early aftermath. Gut-wrenching and haunting in parts, the film is also hopeful—if we understand hope as the everyday process of navigating the nightmare and making it inhabitable, as the work of refuting finality through attention to becoming (see Lear 2006; Mattingly 2010).

The Screen

The film opens with the sound of singing, with an image from a Langtangpa festival that predates the disaster, with a finger touching the screen of a phone, with the painful work of memory. A finger touches the screen: “He is no more, neither is he nor he nor

he . . . all gone.” During my work with this community over the past five years, I have seen so many people touch screens in this way, and I have come to understand that this feeling is a recurring part of the rhythm of life in Langtang, the immensity of absence. This opening scene collapses the distance between us, the viewers, and the loss suffered by the Langtangpas, encouraging a kind of *haptic empathy*, a mode of relating that carefully engages the senses and helps us make sense of the many objects that fill the film, all marked by the disaster.

The Avalanche

In the next scene, all we can hear is the wind. Flying low over the blast zone, we encounter the avalanche itself for the first time—twelve million tons of snow, ice, and earth that fell over ten thousand feet, releasing more than half the force of the Hiroshima atomic bomb.¹ We perceive the scene and begin to ascertain the destruction as the landscape unfurls beneath us, but our understanding lags behind. The film holds us in this liminal space for the duration—for the dimensions of this horrifying event are ultimately unknowable. We can hear the immensity of the disaster in the voices of each of the Langtangpas during all of the black-screen interviews. Sometimes I can hear it in my own. The Langtangpas live in intimate relation with this immensity, with an overwhelming presence which speaks of so many absences. As they work to resettle the valley, they must walk through this space again and again, as the landscape continues to shift and crack. It took more than four years for the last of the ice to melt.

The Collage

We shift from the Langtang Valley to a monastery in Kathmandu—the “Yellow Gompa” where the displaced Langtangpas were permitted to establish a temporary camp. Forty-nine days after the disaster, the Langtangpas gather for a *ghewa* ceremony that will help guide the souls of the 176 deceased Langtangpas through the bardo of becoming toward a fortunate rebirth.² These funerary rites are part of a broader process, what Robert Desjarlais (2016: 160-4) has called “ritual poiesis” that helps to facilitate a “transmutation of life” for the living and the deceased.³ A mass *ghewa*, held at this scale is an unprecedented and unthinkable event for the Langtangpas. Amid the confusion, chanting, tears, and heat, the camera looks over the shoulder of a young girl, seated on the floor of the monastery, who is cutting up photographs and making them into a collage. She goes about her work rhythmically and purposefully. The collage is full of faces, young and old, many smiling. There are twenty-nine photographs in her collage and she is adding another—applying adhesive to the back of the photograph with a glue stick, carefully setting it in place, and then patting it down with conviction. These are the faces of the people who died on April 25, those whose bodies were never recovered. This collection of photographs was made to be burned in effigy, just an hour later—symbolically dissolving presences and attachments, so that these souls could move on. After the burning, the afterimage of this small yet important act of reworking loss, done with care by a child, remains.

The Rope

The rope that Gyalpo finds and carefully knots as he searches through the rubble of his father’s home in the opening scenes of

the film is made of local yak hair. Most likely, his father made it himself. This small piece of material heritage, personal and collective, salvaged from the rubble matters a great deal. It indexes the immediate material intensity of the earthquake and the avalanche, but also hints at subtler and broader changes in the histories of yak herding in Langtang, which has been the principal source of livelihood of the transhumant Langtangpas for hundreds of years.⁴ Only a handful of the herders still make their own rope from yak hair. Mheme Tsering, the old man spinning his handheld *mani* prayer wheel as he speaks directly to the camera about losing his sons, is one. In August of 2019, I watched him weave rope while sitting in the half-sun outside one of the *gorey* (herder's huts) in the high pastures near the Lirung Glacier—proud and strong, at the age of eighty-four. Before I left Langtang in March, he told me that this coming year might be the last time he will be able to return to the *gorey*. At one point later in the film, Gyalpo shows us the small numbered vials used to store milk samples from each of the yakherders in the community. #28, #44, #13. Some of these numbers no longer have people attached to them, due to the devastation of the earthquake or other slower processes of socioeconomic transition—tiny voids that speak to larger patterns of loss and change. At the time of this writing, there are only twelve full-time yak herders remaining in Langtang. This is why rebuilding the cheese factory and getting the remaining herders a good price for their milk is critical. Gyalpo knows all of this, all too well. Kesang understands this too, and that is why he crafted the film the way he did. And this deserves special mention: the film itself directly helped the Langtangpas raise the funds necessary to rebuild the cheese factory in full form. And so, this

film is important in more ways than meet the eye.

The Wall

The final scene begins on the first anniversary of the 2015 earthquake, as a group of a few hundred people, Langtangpas and others, gather at the edge of the avalanche zone and around a newly built “memorial wall.” This wall materializes some of the many different practices of memory work that are woven together in Langtang—a strange kind of “boundary object” that helps coordinate different approaches to grief and remembrance (Star 2010). It resembles a traditional Himalayan *mani* wall, an everyday marker of pathways in sacred landscapes—and it was reconstructed on the site of an older wall destroyed by the avalanche blast—but this wall has more than two hundred and eighty names carved into it across six flat pieces of slate. The names are written in English, and there is another piece of slate where a translation of the words “forever in our hearts” has been carved in eleven different languages.⁵ And all of a sudden, there I am too, seated at the foot of the mountain, at the edge of the avalanche zone, in front of the memorial wall. I hear my voice reading the names of the dead and remember the disembodied feeling I felt as I struggled to keep going, to treat each name with reverence, despite my imperfect attempt. Watching this, one of the most difficult and emotional moments of my entire life, on film triggers so many uncertain feelings. I recall my hesitancy when I was first asked to perform this speech act, and my fear of what reading these names might mean. I took more than twelve minutes to read the names, and the last two were young people I had spoken to just the day before the earthquake. I broke down crying.

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This film is immense for me. As a survivor, someone who has tried to help with recovery in the Langtang Valley, an anthropologist, a friend, it is both familiar and overwhelming. I've watched it at least a dozen times, sometimes with Langtangpa friends who tell me stories on the side. I've watched it with my parents, who also survived the event, but haven't yet been able to return to Langtang. I've written about it once before.⁶ Watching it again now, distant and in suspension between visits to Langtang once again, I am amazed at how much of it feels new. Little things, some I forgot about, some I never saw. . . . I realize that we're all older now—some of the teenage boys in the film are now young married men, many of my friends' faces have changed since, showing the hardship of the years since. The film slowly spirals inward, imperfect and finite, and leaves us suspended. The avalanche itself has melted; the film remains. It leaves us. There is still too much to say.

As time goes by and the Langtangpa continue working to rebuild their lives—wending their way through the *bardo* of COVID-19, now exactly five and a half years after the disaster—the value of this incredible film becomes ever more clear. By carefully portraying the struggles and uncertainties that shaped life in the first year of the aftermath, the film offers another hopeful idea: the Langtangpas, in all their complexity, can teach us a great deal about reorienting ourselves in the wake of crisis and navigating the many *bardos* of our lives, about wayfinding through broken worlds.

Notes

1. For an in-depth geomorphological description of this tragic event see Koji Fujita et al. (2017).
2. I described this *ghewa* ceremony in further detail within a [short piece](#) I wrote for Hot Spots in the summer of 2015 (Lord 2015).
3. Desjarlais's (2016) elegant ethnography of death and dying in a Buddhist world focuses on the Hyolmo people, an ethnic group, literally just over the ridgeline from Langtang, who share several cultural and religious traditions with the Langtangpa—including funerary rites.
4. Transhumance is the agro-pastoralist practice of moving up and down the valley and the elevation gradient throughout the year in response to the seasons and the needs of the herds, shifting between permanent settlements and a fixed network of herding pastures called *kharkas*. In the not-too-distant past, the majority of Langtangpa households followed these patterns of transhumance, and the ethnographic film *Himalayan Herders* (Bishop and Bishop 1997), which focuses on Yolmo communities located on the southern edge of Langtang National Park, depicts these rhythms of transhumance beautifully.
5. While the total number of deaths that occurred in Langtang on April 25, 2015, is currently estimated at just over three hundred, we still cannot say how many people lost their lives in the Langtang Valley. We know that 176 Langtangpas, 70 foreigners, and at least 40 Nepalis died, but the total number of other Nepalis (such as porters and informal workers who died) remains unverified. There are two blank rows in the wall, to commemorate those whose names remain unknown.
6. If interested in reading more about this film, please also see the

more traditional film review that I wrote for *Himalaya: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* in 2017 (Lord 2017).

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