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Review of *Trembling Mountain* by Kesang Tseten

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Trembling Mountain

Kesang Tseten. Nepal. 2016. 84 minutes.

Reviewed by Austin Lord

Trembling Mountain describes the contours of life and death in the Langtang Valley of Nepal, carefully depicting the complexities of post-disaster recovery and intergenerational change side by side. Filmed in a highly ethnographic style, the film chronicles the everyday efforts that people make to reinhabit the Langtang Valley in the wake of the April 25, 2015 earthquake and to regain a kind of sociocultural and material continuity in their ancestral home. As the community struggles to cope with inconceivable loss and to begin the slow process of recovery, filmmaker Kesang Tseten masterfully guides and focuses our gaze on specific moments that speak of deeper struggles and broader transitions. Filled with careful and purposeful detail, the film is also incredibly subtle in its depiction of the layered and uneven work of repair as well as the larger anxieties that shape the

uncertain future of the Langtangpa community. It is a slow walk through sensitive and uncertain terrain, precise and deeply moving.

The film begins with an echo, with the work of memory: a video of Langtangpa dancing at a festival, playing on a mobile phone. A voice interrupts the chanting as a man points to those who have died: “He is no more, neither is he, nor he, nor he... nor the fellow behind. One, two, three, four, five, six... all gone.” This simple statement implies an intense sense of rupture, harsh and difficult to conceptualize or contextualize. And this is, in fact, really the only way to begin. A few seconds later, we are introduced to the scene of the tragedy, to the material immensity of the avalanche and the force of the blast it created. The footage is taken from a helicopter months after the avalanche, and the snow has melted, leaving only a monotone landscape, like the surface of the moon, dotted with a few emergency tarps pulled over piles of debris and materials salvaged from the blast zone. The centuries-old village of Langtang used to be here. We hear the voice of Gyalpo Lama, the central character in this tale, speaking of both the past vibrancy of Langtang and a collective disorientation within the Langtangpa community: “Whatever the mountains gave us, the mountains snatched it all away from us.”

To provide a narrative path through the uncertain aftermath, the film follows Gyalpo as he returns to the Langtang Valley to rebuild the

cheese factory he operates in the village of Kyangjin Gompa. Here the cheese factory—the first of its kind in Nepal, built in the 1970s by a Swiss NGO around the time that Langtang National Park was created—serves as a kind of ‘boundary object’ that marks the transition between traditional pastoral livelihoods based on yak herding and the emergence of a tourism economy. Following the creation of Langtang National Park, which effectively enclosed the Langtangpa community, tourism had steadily increased, generating both new ways of “imagining the good life” and “centrifugal forces” that threatened the social fabric of community (Francis Khek Gee Lim. 2008. *Imagining the Good Life: Negotiating Culture and Development in Nepal Himalaya*. Leiden: Brill). While the Langtang Valley was long considered a *beyul* (sacred hidden valley within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition), it had only recently become a tourist Shangri-La. By weaving Gyalpo’s story together with those of other Langtangpas attempting to rebuild their homes and livelihoods, and by using Gyalpo’s role to focus attention on the acute pressures faced by the yak-herders, the film brilliantly illustrates larger intergenerational tensions shaping both post-earthquake recovery and the ways different futures are envisioned.

Reflecting the uncertainty of life in this liminal period, the film moves back and forth from Langtang to Kathmandu. People are coming and going always, engaged in the cultural,

psychological, and political work that might allow them to move forward. This includes footage of funerary rites being conducted at Phuntsok Choeling Monastery in Kathmandu, where displaced persons from Langtang lived for several months during the early aftermath. Community members and lamas conduct a *ghewa* ceremony, the final stage in the larger process of ‘ritual poiesis’ that facilitates the “transmutation of life” in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Robert Desjarlais. 2016. *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press). Outside the monastery, the sounds of the women singing mix with background chatter, as well wishers and politicians come and go. In later scenes, we follow the Langtangpa as they encounter a variety of bureaucrats, military and police personnel, engineers, and representatives from foreign NGOs—an assemblage of actors that has become common across post-earthquake Nepal. Government officials come to Langtang by helicopter for brief meetings, surrounded by uniformed men, dispensing uninformed assurances. The Dairy Development Corporation declines to forgive loans made to deceased yakherders or to increase the official price paid for milk. Meetings organized to plan recovery activities surface tensions within the community and slippages with the expectations of NGOs attempting to help. Trauma, hope, frustration, and other emotions mix, framed by the larger processes of resettlement and recovery.

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Austin Lord on *Trembling Mountain*

The film also pays particular attention to the materiality and meaning of objects, strange and familiar things scattered throughout the landscape, woven together within the difficult process of reckoning the disaster, moving forward and making life anew. These are things that have been lost and found, artifacts of life before the disaster excavated and repurposed, possessions that outlived their owners, materials laden with sorrow and hope. Some of these objects are worn and weary, a yak herder's rope tied neatly for the ten thousandth time, Buddhist texts and tools dug out from the debris, the logoed coats of the elderly yak herders gifted by foreign visitors years ago. Some are crisp and hopeful, such as the blue tin roofing sheets that adorn the landscape. These objects index the contours of culture and catastrophe in Langtang and provide the viewer with a constellation of material waypoints that describe both loss and the ongoing work of repair.

Toward the end of the film, we see a formal ceremony organized in Langtang village to mark the one-year anniversary of the earthquake. Hundreds of people are gathered at the edge of the avalanche zone, between the ominous avalanche scar and the upper regions of the destroyed village where reconstruction has tentatively begun. A group of local lamas conduct *pujas*, the names of the deceased are read aloud, several different people give short speeches, and a memorial

wall is unveiled—diverse acts of commemoration. Attended by the Langtangpa, the families of foreigners who lost their lives in Langtang, and supporters from around the world, these ceremonies index the entanglement of different memories, hopes, and expectations for the uncertain future. The closing scenes that follow present a variety of tentative beginnings. A ribbon cutting ceremony for a model house reconstructed with the assistance of an NGO; a shot of a freshly painted sign that reads “New Langtang Guest House.” The final scene hints that the cheese factory has resumed operations, albeit within a temporary facility. Gyalpo emerges smiling, wearing a white lab coat as the sun pours in, as a handful of elder herders from the community carry in jugs of yak milk. Gyalpo pours milk into the top of the machine, an assistant churning the mix—a kind of alchemy implied. The Langtangpa are making cheese again, if only for a moment. The future of Langtang is radically open.

Trembling Mountain is a challenging film that is not easily untangled. It hints at the possibility of recovery in the face of suffering and despair, and foregrounds the quiet strength of the Langtangpa community, but it does not invoke optimism. Rather, the film is unflinching in its commitment to representing the intensity and the complexity of the situation in Langtang. This reflects Tseten's commitment to the craft of storytelling and an ethic of accountability that is evident in many of his films. As the

film begins to close, Tseten recedes artfully and quietly—creating space for multiple interpretations and leaving us with no easy answers.

Despite the intensity of the tragedy that occurred in Langtang, the film does not seek to construct an archetypal tale of suffering. Tseten depicts the Langtangpa not merely as victims of disaster or idealized ‘others’ living in a remote Himalayan community, but as complicated people facing uncertainty, doing the best they can. Recognizing, perhaps, the limits of understanding and empathy in such a situation, the film highlights the small moments and tasks that comprise the larger process, some strange and some familiar. It does not play to a particular audience or seek a comfortable narrative, but attempts to show things unadorned and imperfect. Rather, Tseten lets the people of Langtang speak for themselves, and each speaks differently. And from this attention to polyvocality emerges the messy truth of the matter.

Austin Lord is a PhD student in Anthropology at Cornell University whose research focuses on questions of disaster, recovery, and futurity. He was in the Langtang Valley during the April 25 2015 earthquake (Lord, Austin. 2015. Langtang. Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology website, October 14, 2015. <<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/731-langtang>>) and remains engaged in a variety of post-earthquake recovery activities in the Langtang Valley.