

FATAL MOUNTAIN, SACRED MOUNTAIN

..... LAUREN CARROLL HARRIS

Cinema is full of representations of the landscape that inspire terror. The land is a scary place—it is to be feared or conquered. Mount Everest is that most perilous and conquerable landform, inspiring its own canon of mountaineering films. Jennifer Peedom's *Sherpa* is the most recent of that canon: it is a climbing film, an Australian film, and a documentary about the deadliest day in Everest's history.

Sherpa is not the film Peedom set out to make. In 2014, Peedom initially followed Phurba Tashi, adventure travel company Himalayan Experience's main climbing *Sirdar* (head Sherpa), who was approaching the peak for his twenty-second time, attempting to break a world record in the process. His ascent was marred by a colossal avalanche on the Khumbu Icefall—a passage of slow-moving, broken-up glaciers that Sherpa had forewarned their employers about for a long time. Sixteen Sherpa were crushed. The remaining Sherpa were done: they went on strike, demanding better conditions and pay, and asking for the climbing season to be temporarily suspended in honour of the dead.

Peedom's focus is not on the mountain but on the people doing the invisible groundwork for Western tourists, who pay up to \$75,000 for the privilege to climb it. Their cultural ignorance is striking: it is of little consequence to them that the Nepalese Sherpa are an indigenous ethnic minority who migrated from the eastern Tibetan province of Kham in the 1500s. The Khumbu Sherpa worship Chomolungma—what Westerners renamed Everest—as their mother god. They follow a goddess-based religion, whose images and maternalistic-environmental values are shared by almost every pre-historic society from Oceania, Eurasia, America and Africa. It seems the greatest tragedy of the mountaineering industry is not material but spiritual. Since the establishment of tourism in the early fifties, the Sherpa have been compelled to step on their 'Goddess Mother of the Universe'. "You must respect her as a sanctity," Pem Pem Tshering—daughter of the first Sherpa to scale the mountain (ahead of Sir

Edmund Hillary)—tells us in Peedom's film.

To Western climbers, the Himalayas are a road to conquering Earth's highest peak. To the Sherpa peoples, the area is a sacred mountain pass of yak herds, monasteries, water and tree spirits, lakes and protected forests, that the Sherpa are tasked with co-managing. Researcher Jeremy Spoon describes the pass as holding, for the Sherpa, "two overlapping conceptions of land-

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scape"—*beyul*, hidden valleys set aside for Buddhist followers, and *yul-ha*, deities who live on the mountains and protect followers¹. Following their ancestral connection to their small part of the Himalayas, the Sherpa worship the valleys as well as the peaks. Their ability to make a living for their families slams them at direct odds with their environmentally-formed spiritual beliefs. It appears the true threat to humanity is not the mountain but the mountaineering industry, which has also resulted in mass pollution of the region. Robert M Connell wrote twenty-five years ago that the adventure travel business had turned Chomolungma into "the highest trash dump in the world... Even at the top, we found discarded empty cans."²

It is fitting that at *Sherpa's* heart is a moral outrage

1 Jeremy Spoon (2011), "The Heterogeneity of Khumbu Sherpa Ecological Knowledge and Understanding in Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park and Buffer Zone, Nepal," *Human Ecology*, volume 39, number 5, pages 657–672.

2 Robert M. McConnell (1991), 'Solving Environmental Problems Caused by Adventure Travel in Developing Countries: The Everest Environmental Expedition,' *Mountain Research and Development*, volume 11, number 4, pages 359–366.

and a political intelligence, felt humanely—just shown by being present at the right time and letting the Sherpa's story unfold—rather than espoused dogmatically. This is why it is so jarring that the filmic forms used by Peedom follow traditionally Western ways of depicting the natural world. Peedom used to produce documentary material for The Discovery Channel—that is how she came to know Phurba and his community. It shows in her filmmaking choices and the film's construction, its images in sync with the look of heroism and triumph to which we are acquainted from the feats of Edmund Hillary.

The sacred mountain looms over us, towering, menacing. We swoop over and through Chomolungma's chasms in helicopter shots. Like a Lonely Planet video, fogs stream over escarpments in fast motion. Yaks graze idly at a hundred frames per second. A shadow moves across a valley in time-lapse. Nepalese children run through townships in slow motion, Buddhist prayer flags flap in the freezing winds, and orchestras soar. The film is drenched in the shiny techniques of a STA Travel clip and edited with the tightness of a high-end television commercial. It is almost too beautiful, uncanny, and unreal. Perhaps these are the shots Western audiences expect from a mountaineering documentary. The film's cinematographic forms and its environmental ideas are at war. *Sherpa's* themes tell us of an indigenous way of knowing nature, but its images indicate the film was made by a Westerner, and it aesthetically holds those values. The Sherpa's ecological knowledge is embedded in the subtext of the film, but not in the cinematic forms.

Film journalist Paul Byrnes has written about film's weirdly dichotomised depiction of the natural world. "Australian cinema has long been drifting between these two polarities—the pre-Christian ideas [of nature as retribution and death, and] the biblical Garden of Eden, where water gives life."³ He says the exception has been the films of Rolf de Heer, co-created with various Indigenous peoples and particularly with the great actor David Gulpilil.

"*Ten Canoes* was a very powerful gesture of conservation—of both place and memory. This third idea, where we look at sustaining ourselves in the landscape, has yet to be explored in any great depth in our cinema."

After reading Byrnes's comments, I trawled through Australian films to see if he was right. I watched

3 Paul Byrnes, "Water in Australian Cinema," *Australian Screen*, <aso.gov.au/titles/collections/water> Accessed 18 April 2016.

dozens of films in which the environment played a strong role in the setting or the themes, scanning for visions of plenty and equilibrium, conservation of culture and place. I looked for this third idea of nature in cinema, but found little between those two poles of nature as either destructive or idyllic.

Wolf Creek is one of an entire raft of horror films in which the outback is not just a stage against which

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homicide unfolds, but a killer itself. Films like *The Reef*, *The Jungle* and *Black Water* are all made to appeal to tourists' fears of Australian wildlife. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* offers a more muted version of this tradition, the sinister volcanic boulders avenging white settlers' invasion by disappearing Miranda and her friends from the region they cannot understand. The land is a similarly active and destructive force in the *Mad Max* films: bereft of civilisation, characterised by scarcity, exhausted by human disasters and withholding easy sustenance. I found a similar branch of films that intersect with the crime genre, in which the land or the coast are backdrops for murder, rape, and violence, like *Blackrock* by Steve Vidler, which starred a very young Heath Ledger. Similarly, in *Jindabyne*, by revered arthouse director Ray Lawrence, the otherwise peaceful rivers in the Snowy Mountains are the site of an Aboriginal woman's drowning. The waters and the valleys around them become a metaphor for the politics of division and the dramas of reconciliation.

But in *Bliss*, Lawrence's first film, I found a repudiation of Australian cinema's fearful approach to a colonially settled land. *Bliss* begins as a satirical family drama about a man who wakes from a heart attack to realise his comfortable middle-class existence is a hell. By its final scenes, *Bliss* has morphed into something far more amorphous and lovely than a satire about the advertising industry and middle Australia might suggest. Harry flees the city altogether for an isolated patch of forest, in which he grows a tree for his true love Honey Barbara: a tree that is a twenty-year love letter in the making. It is the only way he can find peace. *Bliss's* final sequence, a crane shot of bravura filmmaking that rises through a green canopy, is as euphoric as the film's title promises. *Bliss*, and the novel

by Peter Carey that birthed it, contemplated ideas of sustainability and belonging decades before the mainstream embraced *An Inconvenient Truth* and green bags at Coles. People need not be fated to destroy the space they live in.

Last year's *Tanna* is another anomaly, a drama made by Australian filmmakers collaborating with the Yakel people of Vanuatu, in the Navhal and Nafe languages. In telling the tale of two lovers caught in an inter-tribal conflict, it draws very universalised themes from a very specific story of the people of Tanna, affording global viewers a perspective on a traditional culture hitherto unseen in cinema. It features interstitial shots of the island's volcano, which holds a Chomolungma-like, Uluru-like place in its community's laws and stories. The land here is neither threatening nor dominated. It just is.

Peter Weir's 1977 film *The Last Wave* is a surprising outlier. It is part of the tradition of local films that use images of nature as ways to enact retribution and submission—"the revenge of nature" almost forms its own subgenre of Australian arthouse film. *The Last Wave* uses a metaphorical portrayal of a flood or tsunami as a "premonition of doom!" (as its DVD cover screams) predicted by Indigenous rock paintings, foretold in cave drawings and discovered by the film's white protagonist, David, who is played by a British actor. It's a strikingly biblical allusion to draw. There is, however, something more striking in its final moments. While many films shared very similar ways of visually representing the land—similar shots, similar viewpoints, similar framing devices and compositions—Weir did something else. His lone protagonist stumbles onto a wide shore to meet his tsunami fate. Fully clothed, he kneels into the low waves, cupping his hands and washing his face. As he looks up, the synth score picks up in volume—we realise the great foretold wave is approaching. Instead of showing us David's viewpoint, the next shot puts us inside the wave—inside the barrel—as white foam streams upward through the pipe. We then cut to a shot that is clearly taken from underwater—the kind of perspective you get if you dive under a wave and look back up through the surface toward the light. Great cylinders of water tumble above us. It is one of the few instances I can find in Australian film where the conventions of Western depiction, such as one-point perspective, have been thrown away in favour of a different cinematic language, a different way of seeing.

Sherpa's images are most startling in the brief moments when it breaks out of the wide, towering vistas towards more unconventional shots taken with Go-Pros and small devices. From the ground, we see the mountain through the eyes of the Sherpa. We look down a crevasse as a pair of boot-clad feet takes one cautious step at a time across a horizontal ladder. We look up to see white powdered ice cascading towards us. This handful of shots makes us part of the events, the landscape and the Sherpa community, rather than passive observers

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looking from a God's-eye viewpoint. Other shots turn away from the crowds and commercialism and let us see Himalayan life, human-scaled, from the Khumbu's perspective: extreme close-ups of good-luck juniper burning in town after the avalanche, diagonal light coming through the upper chamber of a monastery. Quiet, small moments from the inside—Chomolungma, not Everest. The effect of these small visual changes in perspective is moving and empathetic, in stark contrast with other titles of the mountaineering canon like *Nanook of the North* (Robert J Flaherty, 1922), the clips of which I have seen capture the Inuit people of Canada's north almost zoologically—like a scientist examines her specimens—and from a distance. Though in the arctic, we may as well be in outer space. This space-alien perspective has been dominant through cinema's history, with white outsiders predominantly telling the stories of others. With empathetic, implicitly political and collaboratively made films like *Tanna*, *Ten Canoes* and, yes, *Sherpa*—despite its two conflicting filmmaking styles—that era is reaching its end.

By *Sherpa's* end Phurba announces, in his quiet and humble way, that he is done climbing the mountain. One of his neighbours contemplates turning away from the mountaineering economy and returning to subsistence farming, ploughing the potatoes that nourished his forebears. Sustaining oneself within the landscape rather than against it. I can hardly think of a better form of progress. ▪