

necessary adaptations to environmental challenges—whether natural or human induced—have always proved a part of reality in Oceania.

Perhaps the most striking cases are in some of the geologically older islands, where soil fertility depended in part on the guano of the millions of seabirds nesting in their forests. When farmers cleared the trees to plant crops they disrupted ancient nutrient cycles. Erosion washed soil off the slopes, and farming techniques, labour practices, and social organization were all transformed as intensive pond-farming of taro and other crops supplanted much less-intensive practices. Land increased in value, and systems of land tenure—and thus of kinship and chieftainship—changed, and with them new notions of conflict resolution arose: in some places, warfare became endemic while in others, leaders became increasingly autocratic.

Important lessons can be drawn. It's entirely possible that climate change won't necessarily render these islands uninhabitable, but they are likely to become very different places, with very different societies in the years to come.

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WHITE SUN = SETO SURYA. *Written and directed by Deepak Rauniyar; editor, David Barker. Nepal: AADI Films, 2016. 1 DVD (89 min.) € 21.00. In Nepali with English subtitles.*

Nepali director, producer, and writer Deepak Rauniyar is a masterful storyteller, and *White Sun*—his second full-length feature with international cinematic release—is a rich and complex film. Set in the aftermath of Nepal's decade-long armed conflict that concluded with a comprehensive peace agreement in 2006 between members of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government, this visually gripping and poignant tale works at many levels: part allegory, part political commentary and part family drama.

Ostensibly, the film is structured around the protagonist Chandra, a reticent if quietly optimistic former Maoist rebel, who after a decade away, returns to his remote mountain village in Nepal upon learning of his father's death. Awaiting him are characters from his past: a brooding and bitter brother, Suraj, who served on the opposing side of what is still often simply referred to as “the conflict”; Durga, a woman he once loved who needs his urgent assistance; a patient little girl, Pooja, eagerly anticipating his return as she believes that Chandra may be her father; and an entire village still divided by caste, class, and party politics. Into this loaded scene, and accompanied by a curious young street orphan in search of adventure and meaning who attaches himself to the protagonist, walks the ever-restrained Chandra. His *nom de guerre* Agni, meaning “fire,” is a fitting label for the simmering embers of anger and entrenched resentment that his return help to reignite.

Many ingrained contrasts center this film, including the rights of men

and the roles of women; the responsibilities of children to their parents, and siblings and friends to one another; and the struggle between an earlier, sacred, religious order and the increasingly secular and political nature of the Nepali state. In *White Sun*, all of these festering questions are condensed into the primary tension between Nepal's rigid past and the more democratic and inclusive future that the country's younger generation yearn for.

In just eight years, Deepak Rauniyar has established himself as one of Nepal's most creative and important writer-directors, with four major films to his credit: *Threshold* (2008), *Pooja* (2010), *Highway* (2012), and now *White Sun* (2016). With each movie, Rauniyar picks and probes at the tensions that lie at the heart of contemporary Nepali society with a tenderness and humour that have become his narrative signature. In *Highway*, a political road movie that tells the story of unacquainted passengers thrown together on a stressful long-distance bus journey, Rauniyar established his skill at capturing the awkward intimacy of everyday interaction across and between social classes. Rauniyar reprises that same closeness in *White Sun*, moving effortlessly between the grimness of death, violence, and suffering on the one hand, and the human potential for trust, love, and transcendent compassion on the other.

In keeping with his earlier films, and thanks to naturalistic acting, first-rate lighting, a frugal, almost haunting music score, and just the right amount of handheld camera-work, *White Sun* functions as Nepali cinéma vérité. Harnessing this documentary quality, Rauniyar makes a compelling case for how the aftershocks of political violence and natural disasters (parts of Nepal were ravaged by devastating earthquakes in 2015 just as filming began for *White Sun*) have deep ramifications and reverberations for Nepal's citizens.

No surprise, then, that *White Sun* was selected as Nepal's entry for the best foreign-language film for the 90th Academy Awards in 2017, and has garnered much critical acclaim since. *White Sun* won four awards at the Fribourg International Film Festival, followed by the New Voices/New Visions Grand Jury at the Prize Palm Springs International Film Festival, "Best Film" at the Singapore International Film Festival, and the prestigious Interfilm Award at the Venice Film Festival. Such international recognition is well-deserved. The production quality of *White Sun* is extremely high, perhaps best illustrated by the professionalism of the titles and subtitles. As someone who has extensive experience translating between Nepali and English, I was particularly impressed by the refinement of the subtitling, effortlessly capturing a great deal of coded cultural information in idiomatic and unforced English.

Most contemporary Nepali films can be categorized as belonging to one of three genres. First, Nepal has its own firmly established "Bollywood" tradition, with the country's insatiable appetite for *masala* movies even spawning the neologism "Kollywood" in reference to Nepal's capital, Kathmandu. Second, and at the other end of the cinematic continuum, the equally predictable category of Nepal Tourism Board-sponsored, Orientalist crowd pleasers

that depict timeless, spiritually enlightened Himalayan folk hailing from no discernable or identifiable country who continue to engage in age-old nomadic and tribal practices of foraging, harvesting, honey hunting, and salt trading, unmediated by the horrors of modernity and indoor plumbing, and peacefully reconciled to the nobility of their poverty. The genre is well represented by films made both within, and outside of, Nepal.

Third, and most noteworthy, Nepal has a home-grown documentary tradition that engages critically with issues of development, social justice, poverty, war, and post-earthquake relief and reconstruction. The impressive Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF), which started as a non-competitive, biennial festival in 2000 and which became an annual event in 2007, continues to grow in strength and visibility. KIMFF hosts a wide selection of films including alpine documentation, archival footage, adventure cinema, experimental shorts, commentaries, anthropological narratives, and feature films.

Deepak Rauniyar and his magnificent *White Sun* chart a course distinct from all of these genres. Documentary-like, but actually a feature presentation, with gentle nods to farce in the Bollywood tradition and with a narrative at the same time situated in the panoramic beauty that is Nepal, the appeal of *White Sun* is in large part its universality. Judging by audience reactions at a recent—and packed—screening in Vancouver, the film appeals to widely diverse publics that include, but are not limited to, scholars of Asia and the Pacific, students of film and those engaged in studying the impact and ramifications of conflict. Rauniyar's skill at blending gravity with levity—seasoned with a sprinkling of humour—makes *White Sun* a treat for movie watchers of all ages looking for insights into life's beauty and complexity.

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