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Watching Them Fall: Mountain Climbing, Voyeurism and the Pornography of Risk

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From Victorian mountaineer Albert Smith to the members in George Mallory's expeditions, there has always been a public side to many climbers, which allowed various forms of discourse to narrate these people as more than just outdoor sportsmen. However, in recent years this public representation has reached new heights, especially with the advent of documentaries about mountain climbing. In addition to the question of how the public nature of climbing affects the climber, the use of cameras in mountain climbing—a form of sport with a real risk for serious injury and death— raises important ethical considerations for onlookers. In postmodern societies which have turned death into a taboo, this voyeurism or pornography of risk (drawing on a formulation by Geoffrey Gorer) is of special interest, as it directs the viewers' gaze towards a spectacle which does not guarantee the climber's survival. As such, the camera problematises the representation and the discursive framing of mountaineering.

This article discusses the evolution of climbing into a spectacle and contextualises the voyeuristic gaze inherent in the pornography of risk. Drawing on various examples, a particular focus lies on Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi's film *Free Solo* (2018) and how this addresses the complicated relationship between public climbers, their audiences and the medium of the documentary film.

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> ‘The most basic issue a mountaineer faces is the risk of death’ (David Roberts, 1986: 195).

> ‘I think everybody who has made free soloing a big part of their life is dead now’ (Tommy Caldwell, in Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a: 25:21–25:26).

1. Introduction

One of the best-known quotes about mountaineering is Sir George Mallory’s apocryphal answer ‘because it’s there’, in reply to an interviewer’s question of why he wanted again to try summiting Mount Everest after the first two expeditions had failed. It is the interviewer’s ‘why’ around which so many essential aspects concerning mountains and mountain climbing seem to revolve. Compared with many other professional sports or leisure activities that do not attract the label ‘extreme sports’, mountain climbing certainly qualifies as one of the riskier ones, simply because the stakes are so high: mistakes, misconceptions or simple misfortunes are much more likely to lead to death or serious injury than in volleyball or chess. For the ‘uninitiated’ then, the relationship between potential success and potentially lethal consequence seems out of balance, which may explain the somewhat incredulous ‘why’.

This, however, applies a utilitarian logic to mountaineering which, at least on a personal level, is incongruent with the enjoyment of potentially lethal activities like deep-sea diving, high-speed motoring or alpine climbing. Claiming that this falls into the realm of individual responsibility and thus has to be addressed as a form of private risk, many climbers would reject the application of utilitarian conceptions. According to John Stuart Mill’s harm principle, which posits that an individual’s liberty may only be restrained if their action harms society’s community of interest (Ten, 1980: 55–61), a mountain casualty would only be accountable to themselves if they do not harm anyone else. This may sound cynical and fatalist, but on the level of the individual, leaving aside that this will also affect relatives and next of kin, the logic is difficult to refute.

However, climbing is in many cases no longer a cultural practice that is limited to the level of the individual, but instead it has become a very visible and public activity. Especially when climbing is commodified in a market economy, private risk becomes public risk. In the same way that mountaineering achievements have always been exploited for public discourse (consider the patriotic spin put on attempts to solve the Eiger North Face problem in the 1930s by the German Nazi regime, or on attempts to finally summit Everest by various governments), mountaineering risks affect the spectating public as well. This is the conundrum of modern mountaineering that could be seen to legitimise the interviewer’s ‘why’. And this is why, even when the question

is not addressed explicitly, hardly a contemporary mountaineering narrative can circumvent to address this existential question (Grebowicz, 2021: 13; see for example the opening sequence of Josh Lowell and Peter Mortimer's 2017 film *The Dawn Wall*). Mallory's famous quip about what Sascha Pöhlmann has called 'thereness', stressing the athletic as well as the cognitive challenge that the mountain poses, may capture the provocation that mountains cause to humans' ontological frameworks (2021: 213–214), but it also highlights the incongruence of the cultural practice of mountain climbing with a world view that assesses human action via its utilitarian value and its inherent risk. And since most mountaineers that die publicly are 'grievable bodies' in the logic of Western capitalism (Butler, 2004: 20–31), in sharp contrast to, for example, the many often unmourned Sherpas losing their lives each year, this incongruence affects the social contracts between climbers and the spectating public. Mountaineering seems to inherently defy utilitarianism, as the ascent of the summit as such has to be regarded as 'utterly useless' (Macfarlane, 2003: 142), but as soon as it intersects with capitalist networks of representation, this defiance seems problematic and raises a whole line of questions about the nature of climbing.

In the following, I want to tackle some of these questions about the inherent risk of mountain climbing. After a short discussion of the fascination that both mountaineers and mountaineers' audiences associate with the risk to climbers' lives, I will call on Geoffrey Gorer's ideas about contemporary pornographies of death in order to suggest why late capitalist societies cannot look away from the popular genre of the climbing documentary. After a short digression towards the cultural meanings of falling bodies in the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I will apply these ideas to the 2018 film *Free Solo* by directors Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi. The central question in this ethically charged discussion revolves around the complex relationship between public climbers, the cameras that capture their ascents, and the complicity of their audiences. In conclusion, this discussion wants to add to the continuous discourse around the contemporary fascination with extreme and potentially lethal sports like mountain climbing.

2. Mountaineering and the Risk of Death

One of mountain climbing's essential features is the fascination with risk. Robert Macfarlane enumerates the most common dangers as follows:

> There are many ways to die in the mountains: there is death by freezing, death by falling, death by avalanche, death by starvation, death by exhaustion, death by rock-fall, death by ice-fall and death by the invisible aggression of altitude sickness [...] Falling is, of course, the ever-present option (2003: 97).

More than with many other sports does the cultural practice of mountaineering imply that those who participate can be seriously injured or even lose their life while pursuing their goals; it is the combination of sublime landscapes with the solitude of the deliberately endangered self which contributed to the fascination of alpine mountaineering from the outset. The risk connected to different forms of climbing and to different climbing environments differs vastly, with, for example, an annual death rate of 45 per 1,000 on Annapurna and a death rate below 1 on Aconcagua (Gatterer et al., 2019: 4), but it is the general risk rather than exact numbers or rates which are relevant here. Of course, there are numerous cases of athletes who have lost their lives in other disciplines as well, such as Francisco Lázaro at the 1912 Olympic Marathon, John Thomson in a 1931 Old Firm football match, and Tom Simpson at the 1967 Tour de France. Nonetheless, the risk of dying is much higher in mountain climbing than in many other sports. And yet, there is a clearly observable tendency in which some climbers engage in projects which multiply this risk, like climbing without oxygen, or putting speed before safety: the higher the risk, the more spectacular the final achievement. The spiral of risk is an essential part of climbing's progression (Grebowicz, 2021: 66), precisely because of this vital link.

In a culture which has for decades seen a 'drift toward entertainment' (Roberts, 1986: 227) and which has in the age of streaming platforms come to represent itself in often spectacular visual documentaries, this urge for ever higher degrees of risk in order to compete within the attention economy is of course heightened. One of the most popular examples for this development comes in Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin's *Free Solo*, the spectacular if controversial 2018 film which documents Alex Honnold's attempt to be the first climber to free solo the cliff face of El Capitan in Yosemite Park. *Free Solo* was certainly not the first of its sort and was preceded by numerous other films documenting professional climbing endeavours, but as a box office hit and with the critical acclaim that the film garnered, it is widely regarded as the standard text when it comes to popular representations of climbing. In the wake of *Free Solo*'s success, a sequence of similar feature films/documentaries were made, like Max Lowe's *Torn* (2021), Peter Mortimer and Nick Rosen's *The Alpinist* (2021) or Torquil Jones's *14 Peaks: Nothing is Impossible* (2021), and this coupling of risk and filmic representation has set new norms in how people experience the world of professional climbing. As the audience for these films is a vast public not necessarily acquainted with mountaineering's intrinsic value systems, the voyeurism directed at people who could potentially fall to their deaths on camera needs closer scrutiny.

The fascination that people have felt watching others climbing mountains is almost as old as modern mountaineering itself. Whether it was the endeavours of Victorian

mountaineer Albert Smith, who turned his alpine feats into an extremely popular revue in the mid-19th century (Fleming, 2000: 157–158), or the expeditions of George Mallory, Edmund Hillary, Reinhold Messner and others, mountaineering was always surrounded by an aura of sensationalism, which attracted the gaze of others. The cinematic gaze began to capture mountaineers at a very early stage, so that mountaineering and the cinema came to mutually rely on each other in producing an imaginary of this cultural practice (Echtler, 2020). The first mountain film is said to date back to 1903, and J.B.L Noel's 1924 documentary *The Epic of Everest* or a host of German *Bergfilme* are among the most successful and most popular European films of the interwar period. But what a film like *Free Solo* exemplifies is a shift from mere fascination and awe to notoriety and stardom for the most courageous or most daring climbers.

David Roberts addressed this in his essay about 'The Public Climber: A Reactionary Rumination'. The evolution of a star industry around mountaineering has created what Roberts calls the 'public climber', and this publicity comes at the cost of solitude and safety; in Roberts' words, public climbing affects the subculture's aura: 'More important than unnecessary risk [...] is the question of what publicity costs the climber in terms of what could be called innocence' (1986: 224). He writes that 'It is [...] vital that climbers, while they are climbing, not have to worry about how they will look in print' (1986: 223). Or on film, one would have to add some 40 years later. The 1996 Everest disaster, as maybe the most notorious example, was partly brought about by a culture of narcissism or over-confidence among liminal climbers (Tempest, Starkey and Ennew, 2007: 1056–1057), in part due to a culture of heroic and sensationalist narratives around mountaineers. The public climber stands in the spotlight, and while this is a spot in which one can shine brightly, it is also one where the gaze of others can objectify the public climber and watch their potential fall.

3. The Objectification of Climbers and the Pornography of Risk

Adam Kadlac, in his thought-provoking book *The Ethics of Sports Fandom*, has argued that fandom tends to objectify the athletes that fans watch perform (2022: 67–74). Some people are reluctant to see mountaineers as sports stars, because the competitive aspect is not as structured as in regular tournaments, as Bernard Suits, calling mountaineering a 'one-player game' (2005: 85-88), has poignantly argued. This distinction notwithstanding, such objectification that Kadlac delineates is happening with climbers on screen as well. Climbing documentaries or feature stories in magazines like *Outside* also share insights into the personalities and the private life of climbers. *Free Solo* only spends a good 13 out of 96 minutes on Alex Honnold's actual ascent of El Capitan and instead devotes a lot of screen time to the narration

of Honnold's life, constructing and developing the film's protagonist. The same is true for most other climbing narratives and is in line with a general narrativisation of athletes. This phenomenon was already happening a century ago, when George Mallory became what we might call a media personality (Macfarlane, 2003: 260–261); this was, after all, the man who was meant to lead a politically charged expedition, underlining English imperial superiority in mastering nature. His mythical status was certainly helped by the fact that Mallory was an attractive and charismatic person, and that readers could be captured and were fascinated by his life story. This is remarkable, because what matters then is not only *that* someone climbs five 8,000-metre peaks within a month, but also *who* achieves this. Nonetheless, mountaineers, like most athletes, 'are regarded only in terms of their ability to satisfy the desires of another' (Kadlac, 2022: 62). This observation lies at the core of the social contract or covenant between audiences and people on screen in general, and shifts our focus on the viewers' gaze. For such discussions, it is of secondary importance which desire in particular these climbers satisfy.

What is noteworthy about this specific form of objectification of public climbers, as mentioned above, is the fact that the satisfaction of viewers' desires comes at the price of potential death. How do audiences deal with their complicity in such existential substitute satisfactions? Kadlac has discussed this question in the context of American Football, where the ethical dilemma is delayed, as recent findings about Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) and other brain diseases have shown that professional footballers are entertaining audiences at a very real (although long-term) risk for serious consequences to their health (2022: 77–92). In mountaineering, this risk is much more immediate and raises the question whether we as viewers can, in good conscience, become complicit in these risks. Apologists could counter that climbers take these risks voluntarily and are well aware of the danger to their lives; they could also argue that the risk is being taken no matter if we watch or if we do not. After all, it is not the activity as such that is immoral or should be forbidden (Kadlac, 2022: 80). This discussion of the complicity of audiences is a lot more complicated, however, as it leads back to the moral concerns that David Roberts raises about the consequences of climbers becoming 'public climbers'.

Objectification as a sociological concept is much more virulent in discourses of sexual pornography than in discourses around sporting athletes (Nussbaum, 1995), but there are a couple of links between these discourses. Anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer introduced the term 'pornography of death' in the 1950s, which, as I suggest, can be extended in the mountaineering discourse to a pornography of risk. Gorer claimed that modern Western societies, which have postponed death in a way nobody

would have deemed possible 200 years ago, have developed a strange fascination with representations of death as one of the last taboos; while actual death decreases, screen deaths increase massively, 'abandoning real life for representation' (Tercier, 2013: 1). Gorer distinguishes between natural and unnatural deaths, or what Baudrillard later called violent deaths (Stratton, 2020: 4). Natural death, which seemed to be the logical conclusion to a person's life, used to be omnipresent in former centuries: 'It can have been a rare individual who, in the 19th century with its high mortality, had not witnessed at least one actual dying, as well as paying their respect to 'beautiful corpses'' (Gorer, 1955: 50). In those days, death was 'no mystery' (Gorer, 1955: 50) and for that reason no social taboo. However, in the 1950s natural deaths had become increasingly rare and, according to Vivien Sobchack, 'less 'natural'' (1984: 284): natural death was moved from the home to the hospital bed and became 'institutionalized, medicalized, and technologized' (Sobchack, 1984: 284), and was thus more and more concealed from the public. At this moment in cultural history, Gorer notices a shift in the voyeuristic fascination with unnatural death, which he sees increasingly portrayed in crime films or news stories, and thus represented out of proportion. As natural death is tabooed in public discourse, unnatural or violent death becomes a catalyst for the unspeakable.

Gorer is certainly not the first scholar to do so, but he draws an important parallel between sex and death: 'In both types of fantasy, the emotions which are typically concomitant of the acts – love or grief – are paid little or no attention, while the sensations are enhanced as much as a customary poverty of language permits' (1995: 51). For this analogy to work, Gorer needs marital sex to be understood as 'natural sex', which is not what pornography normally depicts. Instead, it is the 'unnatural sex' outside of marital bonds, sensation instead of emotion, which becomes the structure of sexual pornography. Unnatural death offers a similarly sensational deviation from the natural deathbed. Continuing this line of thought, the essential parallel lies in the objectification inherent in pornographic performances: of unnatural sex in porn films, as well as of unnatural death in crime or horror films. The unnatural act eroticises and thus enables a 'scopophilic interest in watching death' (Stratton, 2020: 7) and has led Michael Hviid Jacobsen to describe this contemporary fascination as an 'age of spectacular death' (2020). By extension of Gorer's analogy, the aforementioned objectification of climbers potentially falling to their death is another example of this form of pornography. Mountaineering deaths, especially in their public form, would certainly fall under Gorer's category of unnatural deaths, which is why the voyeuristic fascination with this type of death is so relevant.

Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, one of the directors of *Free Solo*, is well aware of this spectacle as a selling point for the film. In a making-of clip added as bonus material

on the DVD and on the National Geographic website, tellingly titled 'What if he falls?', she seduces potential viewers in a suspenseful voice: 'One false move, one slip, and it's over' (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018b: 00:24–00:26). A little later, she herself asks the crucial question: 'But is it ethical to film someone while he risks his life?' (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018b: 01:18–01:21). The performativity of the question seems to suggest a pre-emptive answer, but it self-consciously reminds viewers of what is at stake. Vasarhelyi then legitimises the project by claiming that documentary filmmakers in general could always interfere with the subject they are capturing, but this neglects that not all documentary subjects are as 'utterly useless' as Honnold's ascent. This uselessness would make his death on camera particularly unnatural and, following Gorer, pornographic. However, since climbing documentaries only suggest the possibility of death, I am calling this a pornography of risk, rather than a pornography of potential death. Here, the possibility of an unnatural and unspeakable death, one that should not happen, is inherent in the practice that is being filmed; this makes the athletic feat, if successful, all the more remarkable, but it also is part of the eroticised spectacle, of the fact that we cannot look away. Ultimately, even the distinction between death and risk gets blurred, as mountaineering is a culture which is permeated by death and the permanent possibility of death. For instance, Alex Honnold's former climbing partner, Tommy Caldwell, explains in *Free Solo* that over the years he has lost more than 30 climbing acquaintances (Tommy Caldwell, in Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a: 25:21–25:26) and the film also presents footage of the headlines of famous climbers who have died while climbing. The mere suggestion of death in the risk that climbing documentaries represent, activates the voyeuristic discourse of the pornographic spectacle – or the spectacular pornography.

Employing this analogy and taking up Gorer's use of the term 'pornography' certainly implies a negative connotation, as it is alleged to depict something unnatural. The term does not necessarily have to be understood in this way, though, as the porn-positive movement has advocated in recent years (Queen, 1997). Nonetheless, the dominant notion of pornographic images seems far from neutral. In M. John Harrison's novel *Climbers*, for example, the narrator also uses the term 'pornography of risk' to criticise images of free soloists in glossy outdoor magazines (Harrison, 2022: 18). An awareness of the mostly negative coding of the term will help to contextualise Gorer's argument and my adaptation of it to the voyeuristic spectacle of climb-watching and its inherent risks.

It is certainly noteworthy that this obsession with risk, more precisely with the ultimate, the existential risk, comes at a time in which the late capitalist or neoliberal mode of being has tried to eliminate or delegate risk wherever possible from real life, or

rather to privatise it on the level of the individual; the suggestion that the emergence of the public climber and the neoliberal subject are coincidental does therefore not seem too far-fetched. There are parallels in the role of speculation and risk. Mortgage payments which are secured via secondary mortgages, debts that are coupled with derivatives, et cetera, are no longer stable fixtures and are sold on into complex arrangements which are first of all attempts to spread and consequently control the risk of financial loss (Hacker, 2008: xii–xiii, 5–8). In the 21st century, various forms of diversification or mutualisation of financial risk have become the norm; all of these strategies are in line with a system which spreads systemic risk down to the level of the individual. At the same time, speculation and an openness to risk evolve as an essential mode of the neoliberal persona: 'speculation does not represent an irrational divergence from fundamental values, but is the constitutive orientation of the modern subject' (Konings, 2016: 271). The paradox of the neoliberal mode then, is that the 'distinctive imaginary of capitalism is that we may move through risk beyond risk' (Konings, 2016: 271). In consequence, successful hedge fund managers or investment bankers are often praised for their courage and boldness, as if taking risks and being rewarded is the ultimate character trait. On the other hand, this is enabled by a system which has turned a lot of risk into pseudo-risk, where systemic risk needs guarantees from state actors, as in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

If risk has thus been pushed back into the realm of the private, in a similar move to the way natural death or natural sex had been shifted into privacy, a pornography of risk takes its appeal from exactly this discursive shift. The public climber who takes an originally innocent and private risk in gambling their life on the mountain face is now exposing themselves and this existential risk to the public gaze of the camera. This gaze may be aware of the ethically problematic aspect of what is happening on screen, but as with all pornographies, the gaze cannot turn away from these images. If the climb is successful, that is if the climber survives, the existential gamble elevates the success of ascent onto a new level; the alternative outcome is one that we do not even contemplate. *Free Solo* reminds viewers again and again how Alex Honnold's filmed ascent ticks all of these boxes: the absence of ropes, the suboptimal odds, the abandoned first attempt. But mostly the medium self-referentially makes sure that we do not suspend our voyeuristic awareness whenever the film suggests the consequences of a false step. Then again, the genre's appeal comes from the tacit contract between audience and medium that the narrative is geared towards success instead of catastrophe. As Tommy Caldwell puts it in the film: 'His [Alex Honnold's] attitude towards risk could make you feel kind of invincible. Which is emotionally appealing. But, for me, I don't think it's the smartest thing' (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a*:* 21:19–21:35).

4. Another Kind of Public Fall

As a counterpoint, I want to suggest a parallel with another key text for the 21st century which may help us contextualise our relationship with climbers potentially falling to their deaths: Richard Drew's notorious but iconic photograph 'The Falling Man', capturing one of the thousands of World Trade Center victims jumping from the towers on 9/11. Drew's photograph of an unidentified man who jumped from one of the burning towers and is captured falling headfirst to his death caused a lot of controversy: the *New York Times* printed it on the day after the attacks, but many readers criticised this as violent and voyeuristic, turning 'tragedy into leering pornography' (Junod, 2003), and speculation by journalists about the falling man's identity attracted a lot of criticism from relatives (Linfield, 2011). I am not suggesting any parallel between the 2001 terrorist attacks and mountain deaths, and I certainly do not want to cynically downplay the fate of terror victims and compare them to adventurers who voluntarily risk their lives. It is in the cultural significance of the image that the questions raised by the pornography of risk around public climbers are enhanced.

Veteran photojournalist Drew's photograph triggered a lot of instantaneous criticism, claiming that he sensationalised the tragic fate of a man seconds away from his death; the fact that, even when faced with certain incineration in the building, the picture suggested a man choosing to commit suicide caused further outrage. Tom Junod commented in *Esquire*: 'the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo'. It was only with geographical distance in countries outside the US, or with temporal distance years later, that newspapers reprinted the photograph in the aftermath of so much criticism. László Munteán specifies the cultural significance of grasping the falling bodies in more detail:

> Images of the jumpers [...] attest to a particular category within the photographic archive of 9/11. They present a kind of horror that differs from the sight of carnage. While the hero-cult of the victims obviously serves the purpose of translating trauma into a narrative, whereby loss gains meaning as an act of sacrifice [...], the only deaths that involved agency on the part of the victims were those of the fire-fighters who were killed in the collapse and the people who jumped out of the towers to escape death by fire. This latter form of intentionality, however, would not pass smoothly as heroism (2020: 86).

Any suggestion of a heroic narrative around these bodies falling to their unnatural death thus seemed difficult. Junod, on the other hand, even identified a certain aesthetic defiance in the image, and despite its shocking subject the image was turned into a chiffre of the horror of 9/11.

In his 2007 novel, also titled *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo offers an interesting variation on the image. DeLillo's protagonists, estranged New York couple Keith and Lianne, have been traumatised by the events of 9/11 and are trying to navigate life in the city after the attacks. Drew's photograph gives shape to this unspeakable horror, but in the novel, there appears a performance artist who calls himself Falling Man and tries to reenact the fall from the tower by throwing himself from various buildings in the city wearing a special harness which keeps him from hitting the ground. Versluys has argued that the artist literally stands in for the victims who did not have a choice and had felt forced to jump from the towers (2009: 23), but the performances seem much more complex. While the safety harness, for example, is visible to many spectators, the artist also performs for a train full of subway passengers who are meant to believe that he actually falls (DeLillo, 2007: 164–165). This whole act is reminiscent of French artist Philippe Petit, who traversed the distance between the Twin Towers on a tightrope in 1974. The Falling Man in DeLillo is on the one hand a living memento mori above the city, but he also has a redeeming quality in stopping the fall and defying the dominant image of death – until he meets his end and becomes even more of a reenactment of Richard Drew's photograph.

Something not so different happens in another of the most canonical works of 9/11 fiction, as in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, eight-year-old protagonist Oskar Schell constructs a flipbook with images of a man falling from the tower, but instead of falling to the ground, Oskar reverses the order of the images and makes the man soar towards the sky (2005: 329–355). The novel closes with this sequence of a couple of dozen pages and thus the flipbook forms its final statement defying the original course of history. What these fictional examples, as well as texts that redeem the pornographic horror of the image (Junod, 2003), do is to suggest that even the moment caught in Richard Drew's photograph does not necessarily break a taboo and can be reimagined, as it captures a man who is still alive. Despite knowing better, this figure can be reimagined as being able to defy death. Ultimately, and this sounds cynical in the case of 9/11, the image only suggests a potential death. This is what the image in its cultural afterlife shares with the Alex Honnolds and other public climbers: these examples confront us with the idea that this person will certainly die if they hit the ground, but if they do not, they can even be read as a symbolic affirmation of humanity's potential to control risk, to stop or avoid the fall. Of course, our rational faculties know that none of the falling bodies from the World Trade Center survived and *Free Solo* or similar films remind us that other climbers have indeed fallen and did not survive, but if these artistic negotiations of risk suggest alternative meanings around potential falls, this is telling in its own right.

5. Climbing and the Scopophilic Gaze

In the context of the previous discussion, it is not so pressing to speculate *why* people like Alex Honnold risk their life climbing and allow or even encourage camera crews to potentially witness them falling to their deaths. It seems more important to shift the focus to the presence of these cameras, and to our gaze, as we confront the question whether it is ethical to watch these gambles. While the contemporary ubiquity of this gaze describes a relatively new development, even early mountaineering ascents encouraged forms of voyeurism: the Eiger North Face, for example, became a mythical place not only because it seemed undoable for such a long time, but because people from nearby Kleine Scheidegg could witness through telescopes where mountaineers got stuck on the wall. More than one climbing catastrophe becomes even more chilling because onlookers could more or less see people perish on the mountain (Ring, 2001: 244–245). From professional climbing documentaries to action cam footage on various social media platforms or Everest summit selfies, the public gaze directed at contemporary mountaineers seems almost ubiquitous.

There are lots of reasons motivating audiences to watch ascents that are narrated as superhuman. In Honnold's case, for example, Margret Grebowicz calls this a fascination with 'the utopia of an accelerated Vitruvian man, of minimalism, solitude and unadulterated doing-whatever-the-fuck-one-wants' (2021: 65). The novelty of the pioneering act, especially in the light of previous failed attempts by others, explains the extreme appeal of Honnold's El Cap ascent for any armchair climber. But all this fascination is accompanied by the constant half-presence of what the *New York Times* once called 'Mountaineering's Oldest Companion: Tragedy' (Weichert, 2017). As mentioned before, different from other athletic feats like Usain Bolt running the 100 metres or Pep Guardiola's 2009 Barcelona team performing their tiki-taka, the risk that athletes climbing mountains might not just suffer injuries but fall to their deaths and perish during their athletic endeavours is enormously higher. We may try to suppress thinking about it, but this danger, this risk, is always there and therefore becomes a quintessential component of the activity as such and its potential achievement (Kadlac, 2022: 85). Robert Macfarlane cites French writer Paul Claudel to underline this point: 'we lack wings to fly, but we always have strength enough to fall' (cited in Macfarlane 2003: 97).

This is, in itself, an ethical dilemma for mountaineers and their loved ones. Macfarlane continues that, 'People who regularly take big risks in the mountains must be considered either profoundly selfish, or incapable of sympathy for those who love them' (2003: 98), as 'there is nothing inherently noble about dying in the mountains: indeed that there is something atrociously wasteful about it' (2003: 99).

But while this is something to be negotiated between the mountaineer's consciousness and conscience, or between him and his close relations, this omnipresent risk takes on another significance when people watch people climb and potentially watch people fall, with all elements of a pornography of risk included. There is a private death that lingers in all mountain ascents, but for the public climber there is a public death to complement the private one.

When discussing a film like *Free Solo*, we may not forget that most such productions are cut and compiled with the hindsight of a successful attempt. It is futile to discuss whether the film would have been released had Alex Honnold fallen to death, even if director Jimmy Chin says on camera that the team wanted to create 'something we can live with even in the worst-case scenario' (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a: 24:27–24:30). But while there are, to my knowledge, no climbing documentaries which actually represent bodies in the act of dying, there are examples where on release the protagonists were already dead, like Marc-André Leclerc in *The Alpinist*. In January 2026, Alex Honnold himself engaged in a successful live ascent of Taipei 101, a skyscraper with a giant glass front in the capital of Taiwan. Netflix claimed to broadcast this ascent live, which caused some controversy. But all previous climbing films are produced with the gift of hindsight. *Free Solo* produces an ambiguous effect, because on the one hand it derives its thrill from the question whether Honnold will succeed in free soloing El Capitan, although audiences versed in the structure and nature of such films very much expect that he is going to make it. And yet, on the other hand, there is the lingering doubt over his possible death, to be captured on film. Margret Grebowicz calls watching the film an 'uncanny experience [...] premised on the question *Will he make it?* – down to the nail-biting finale – when, in fact, everyone watching knows that Honnold did indeed make it' (2021: 69).

In consequence, the scenes in the film where members of the camera crew seem to anxiously look away because it is too hard to bear Honnold voluntarily gamble his life are only acceptable for viewers because Honnold survived. From an ethical point of view, they would not be acceptable if he had not; and there are numerous examples where our gaze focusses on people who have indeed fallen and died, although not live on tape. Caetlin Benson-Allott has written that it is by pure chance 'that *Free Solo* is not a snuff film' (2019: 68) in which we have to witness the real death of a real person. But this of course raises the important question whether it is ethical to undertake a filmic project like this at all, and even if *Free Solo* is not a live broadcast, the presence of cameras and people manning them, is problematic for a number of reasons. Especially in the 10-minute making-of, which is part of the DVD release, but also within the film itself, director Jimmy Chin and his crew make it clear that they are aware of this ethical

dilemma and that no one had any illusions about the consequences should Honnold have slipped while trying to summit El Cap. Chin concedes on camera that it is 'hard to *not* imagine your friend Alex [...] falling through the frame to his death' (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a: 24:03–24:18). But does this admission make our dilemma any better? Is it ethical to film someone trying something so reckless? And are we complicit if we watch? Does the fact that nobody forced Honnold to do this, that the action captured in *Free Solo* is the consequence of his free will, make the ethical uncertainty more acceptable? Once again, all of these questions gain traction in the framework of the pornography of risk/death, because they activate the tension between unease and fascination that audiences experience with pornographic images in general.

At first glance, one could simply file these repeated hints at the possibility of a dead protagonist as a Hollywoodesque move to emphasise the cathartic triumph at the end. The narrative arc of the film, for example, depends on a called-off first attempt and reminders of previous failed ascents to draw a clearer picture of how spectacular Honnold's ultimate triumph over the granite face of El Capitan is. The fact that this climber is never about to give up and even willing to risk his life of course adds to his Vitruvian persona. On the other hand, it is this stubbornness which may very well undermine viewers' willingness to identify with Honnold. When his girlfriend confesses her understandable worries and is close to tears when thinking about what might happen, Honnold's lack of empathy in his response, saying that he does not feel 'obligated by anyone to maximise his lifetime' adds to his characterisation as a superhuman athlete and adventurer, but it calls into question his simplest instincts as a social being (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a: 53:58–55:11, 1:10:51–1:11:31). This is underlined by other gender-conservative scenes in which Honnold seems reluctant to accept the domestic logic of his partner, because his spirit – that is the film's obvious message – transgresses such limitations (Sexl, 2023: 276).

Given that *Free Solo* targets a broad audience of non-mountaineers, the utilitarian questions posed at the beginning of this article come to the fore again. As, from the utilitarian perspective, the ascent in itself seems utterly useless, and does not bring about scientific, artistic, political, or moral progress for humanity, the defiant and performative egotism of Honnold's existentialist act impinges significantly on the way that audiences interpret the film character Alex Honnold. The whole point of his achievement has no collective significance, but is merely an expression of a subject's individual self-realisation (Sexl, 2023: 271). This is in line with a romanticised conception of mountain climbing as a cultural practice in subject formation, but it clashes with the tacit contracts of the documentary medium and its frameworks of commodification which construct this filmed subject in the first place.

Watching *Free Solo* as a pornographic text thus makes us consider the role of the spectator's gaze. Although writing about television and not about cinema, Helen Wheatley has called television the 'posthumous medium *par excellence*' (2024: 15, italics in original), and of course we have to make allowances for television's liveness when comparing cinema and television deaths, but nonetheless the screen promises to capture and represent people once they have died in the form of memories from when they were still alive (Wheatley stresses the role of archival screen footage as a form of memorialisation), rather than at the moment of them leaving this life. Benson-Allott acknowledges that the contract or covenant between viewers and filmmakers is put to the test in a film like *Free Solo*, and summarises that 'spectatorship is fundamentally an act of faith' (2019: 68). In the case of *Free Solo*, filmmakers Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi seem to potentially 'violate its spectatorial contract by threatening to show viewers more of the real than they agreed to see' (2019: 69). The film is deliberately ambiguous about ethical responsibility: there is more than one crew member who repeatedly suggest that they are not quite ok with filming and are worried about messing with Honnold's existential ascent (cited in Benson-Allott, 2019: 70; Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018b: 3:46–3:48, 8:09–8:29; Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2018a: 1:12:45–1:13:00); Chin acknowledges the lethal possibility of the project with a sour face; and Honnold himself tells the camera that he doesn't think falling to death in front of your friends is the nicest thing to do – and yet, all of these people have followed through with making *Free Solo*. Despite its positive outcome, this in some way also extends the question of ethical responsibility to audiences. Vivien Sobchack has noted that images of unsimulated death pull viewers into an orbit of ethical responsibility, as '*the viewer's very act of looking is ethically charged*' (1984: 292, italics in original). Even with the hindsight of his survival, are we complicit in Honnold's maybe-death when we watch his ropeless ascent?

Free Solo is far from the only climbing film which confronts audiences with questions of complicity in their pornographic voyeurism. Peter Mortimer and Josh Lowell's 2017 film *The Dawn Wall* about Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson's first free climb of El Capitan's south-east face does not address the climbers' potential death as explicitly, partly because the risk of death already seems more pressing in the flashback scenes in which Caldwell narrates how he was once taken hostage in Kyrgyzstan, but the lethal consequences of a potential accident on the wall are more than obvious. In Jimmy Chin's earlier film *Meru* (2015), risk is again omnipresent. This film follows Chin and his fellow climbers Conrad Anker and Renan Ozturk in their 2011 attempt to climb a spectacular new route up the Shark's Fin on Meru Peak in the Himalayas. Ozturk is seriously injured a couple of months before their second attempt and is warned by doctors to not take part

in the ascent as it may cause a brain haemorrhage (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2015: 50:10–51:24). One may wonder why his friends and crew do not stop him, even when during the ascent Ozturk does suffer a mini-stroke, but the audience continue watching as well (Chin and Vasarhelyi, 2015: 1:08:20–1:12:39). As with *Free Solo*, the risk of falling is a constant danger, but in *Meru*, the stubbornness of climbers who have just borne near-fatal accidents adds another dimension. Peter Mortimer and Nick Rosen's 2021 film *The Alpinist* is even more ambiguous, because the film's subject, climber Marc-André Leclerc, is extremely reluctant about being filmed and thus complicates the perception of the public climber. He does consent, though, and is documented while being the first climber to free solo Torre Egger in Patagonia in the winter. 18 months later, however, Leclerc and a friend go missing on a climbing expedition and are presumed dead, which means that *The Alpinist* does indeed end with a dead protagonist, even if he did not lose his life in the making of the film.

Obviously, the myriad climbing films/documentaries can be explained by the huge mainstream success of *The Dawn Wall* or *Free Solo*, as well as the advances in technology for filming climbs and a culture which spirals into ever more spectacular attempts at setting new records or succeeding at new routes. Climbing, for mainstream audiences, in these films often serves as a metaphor of endurance and resilience, with a combination of athletic prowess and analytical problem-solving (Grebowicz, 2021: 17). But none of these films can escape the documentary medium's main dilemma wherein the protagonists can only survive constant action replay if they survive in the first place; the possibility of death is omnipresent and the risk of such deaths is one of the most important and appealing inherent or generic features of these films. Our viewers' gaze is thus a pornographic gaze, which is obsessed with the existential risk around which the narrative arc revolves. But in a cultural practice that has not yet eliminated the threat of death, the cameras make the risk of death more present and act as constant reminders of what could happen.

6. Conclusion

What all the narratives and images of public climbers do is confront us consciously or subconsciously with the taboo of death. However, none of these films actually break the taboo, they only suggest that the taboo could be broken. They do not in their pornographic suggestions depict death, which still seems too transgressive and not socially acceptable, but a pornography of risk. The Falling Man image of 9/11 is only negotiable because the falling body has not yet crashed on the ground. Although we know how this is going to end, the in-between-ness of falling seems more acceptable than the inevitability of the shattered skull and bones. Don DeLillo's novel evades

the touchdown of the falling man, Jonathan Safran Foer's flipbook escapes into the fantasy of the body floating upwards instead of down, and the original image within the medium's timeframe remains vague and only *suggests* its ultimate outcome. Something similar seems to be happening with the potential fall of climbing bodies; as long as this possibility is only suggested, the pornography of risk is to the same extent transgressing a taboo as it is defying it within its narrative frame. The apparent futility of climbing a summit, which happens 'because it is there' re-inscribes the late capitalist logic with an ambiguous approach to risk: on the one hand, audiences delegate the desire or the urge for risk towards the objectified public climber, while the handling of risks seems to affirm the possibility to control it and defy death. However, and this is the unease that lingers on as a constant subtext in all of these texts: we can never be sure. And yet, one would have to add, they keep on climbing.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Filmography

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