Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Sperryn Jones, Joanna (2019) The risk of breaking. VIS Journal, 1 (1).

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/3694/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: https://www.en.visjournal.nu/the-risk-of-breaking/

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

introduction

from damage to 'risk'

biking and breaking

risk and restriction

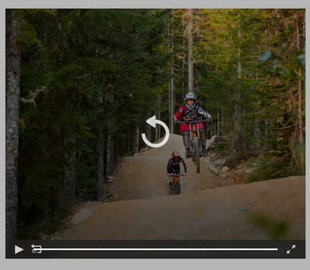
breaking the body

experiencing risk

making and breaking 'risk'

references

I perceive the feeling of being airborne on a bike and the experience of recovering from injury as complete opposites. It is a move from feeling graceful, strong and able to conquer anything to being clumsy, slow, weak and barely coping with everyday tasks. Once the hospital has immobilised you and the injured area of the body stiffens up then even basic tasks are painfully slow; tying shoe laces, brushing hair, getting dressed. Navigating around public space I am aware of how fragile I am and how vulnerable I am compared to others. I am constantly aware that my body's function is impaired. In *A Leg to stand on* Oliver Sacks writes about his experience of breaking his leg and says he felt like an animal with a broken back dragging its hind legs along (1990: 26). I feel disadvantaged in relation to others, upset by the diminished functionality of my body and bored by restrictions on what I can do. Just living basic life, getting up and showering and dressing takes so much more time and I feel how little I am able to achieve. I long for excitement and adrenaline but my body is not capable of doing the things that produce this. The passiveness makes me feel like I am in a room and watching life on a TV set, as if there is a gap between what I see and what is there. It is as if what I see and experience outside of myself is not 'real'.



Mountain biking is the opposite to injury; it is a feeling of being completely in the present in space and time, in direct and active contact with the outside world. I am doing so much more than everyday functions; making the energy of the bike and gravity flow through me as I control the points where I store energy and then throw it back out again. Oliver Sacks notes that when you are able to do things unconsciously there is a centre, an organisation with the agency 'I' forming a seamless perfect whole. He suggests that 'grace' forms the centre of the organisation (1990: 149). Easkey Britton reflects on her experience of big wave surfing 'that ability to let go and break patterns of resistance within ourselves… it's this last part of the process, the letting go, that I like to think of as grace' (Williams 2016: 127). The art critic Clement Greenberg has also drawn a relationship between taking aesthetic risks to provide transcendent grace (Blocker 2008: 196). It seems grace requires moving beyond every day restrictions but with a confidence from developed skills that allow unconscious action.

The lack of grace and feelings of clumsiness experienced in injury create a sense of separation between self and body as the physical limitations make it feel imprisoning and alien. Drew Leder suggests injury or illness creates social dys-appearance; where the body comes to the forefront of our attention whilst in a state of dysfunction. Under normal circumstances he proposes the body is backgrounded as we use it to perceive and focus on the world around us (1990: 96). This would explain the sense of presentness as our focus extends in the world versus the feeling of passively watching as we feel contained inside the body watching.

Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor explore 'escape attempts'; risk taking as a way in which 'individuals seek to transcend the banal, routine nature of everyday life' (Lupton 2013: 205). Anthony Giddens proposes that people are ambivalent towards the routines and habits that establish and maintain ontological security (a sense of predictability and security). When routines are shattered it can create anxiety and fear, however we can also choose to pursue the 'edge' that routine lacks (Lupton 2013: 206). We oscillate between different states.

After breaking my collarbone three times I decided that I would ride more safely and not get airborne. On my first ride out we stopped at a little learning drop jump for new people to practice on and I agreed to lead them into it. It was only a two feet drop but it was enough to instil the sensation of freefall. I feel good; in tune with my body and focused within the present. Around the corner is a ten feet gap jump, shortly followed by a kicker that sends me soaring into the air, I feel electric. In 'Broken Arm' Henri Michaux also observes this phenomena, 'Soon forgetful – forgetting now in the other direction (one consciousness excludes the other) – I was beginning to use my arm again in a matter-of-fact way…' (1994: 249).

I find the attraction to push to the limits of breaking, both in my artwork and in mountain biking, increases the more I do them. I enjoy the element of risk, and this enjoyment encourages further risk. Deborah Lupton (2013: 207) observes that adrenaline allows the body's senses and emotion to take over from the rational mind. Risk taking in making could be carrying too many unfired bone china twigs or creating moulds and pieces that stretch technical limitations. In biking this involves larger and more dangerous gap jumps and steeper technical descent closer to cliff edges. However when I am injured and look at photographs of me airborne on my bike I feel it was stupid to take such risks. Lupton (2013: 203) notes, 'the emphasis in contemporary societies on the avoidance of risk is strongly associated with the ideal of the 'civilized' body, an increasing desire to take control of one's life, to rationalise and regulate the self and body, to avoid the vicissitudes of fate….To take unnecessary risks is commonly seen as foolhardy, careless, irresponsible and even deviant…' Oliver Sacks notes after his injury he, 'would see all life, all being, as the most precious gifts, infinitely vulnerable and precarious, to be infinitely prized and cherished' (1990: 187). For me this view vanishes again as soon as I return to the risk-taking activities. When I am injured in addition to seeing risk taking as foolhardy I also long for excitement to break from the restricted movement of my injured body. This indicates the complexity of the balance between ontological security and risk taking.

I feel calm, in control and powerful when I am taking risks on my bike. I am focused on the task and I'm ready to react to problems. What seems important in the relationship between ontological security and risk taking is control. On the one hand control involves minimising risks but there is a point where minimising risks in itself becomes restrictive and taking risks can be a means to regain control. Hans Jost Frey proposes the daredevil is not someone who has lost control but they remain sober even in the inebriation of danger (1996: 70). Could it be that this test of controlling emotions increases the feelings of power? Similarly the emphasis on phronesis (practical wisdom) adds to the sense of power as advanced practical skills enable us to 'act swiftly with clear sighted vision in fast moving situations' (McNamee 2007: 7).

←

→

←

→

The sense of being contained and constrained in injury compared to the expansive feelings of taking risks in the landscape interests me. In *Philosophy, Risk and Adventure Sports* Mike McNamee suggests that outdoor sports demand our attention and interaction with the natural environment, by needing to respond to unpredictable features in a trail such as rocks or roots. Deborah Lupton (2013: 215) suggests that intense emotion and focused attention lead to altered perception of time and space that create feelings of hyper-reality which we can experience as authentic and being truly alive. Drew Leder contrasts the experience of sport with injury noting the expansion into the environment;

> The expanse of the distance sense is replaced by the oppressive nearness of coenesthesia. We are no longer dispersed out there in the world, but suddenly congeal right here. Our attention is drawn back not only to our own bodies but often to a particular body part' (1990: 75).

Mike McNamee (2007: 43) and JesúsÍlundain-Agurruza (2007: 149-168) propose a relationship between extreme sports and the sublime. If the sublime is understood as an appreciation of the almost inconceivable power of nature where our experience would be fear if we were not in a position of safety then a tension exists between internalising those perceptions of uncertainty but from a safe line. Easkey Briton (Williams 2016: 132) describes an experience of surfing in a storm where 'despite the fury of the sea, it was the first time I felt like I belonged there'. The times I have felt most at one with the world have been heli-lifting to the top of Retallack mountain in Canada to bike down the scree, riding the Milky Way ridgeline in Peru through the Andes mountains and jumping out of a plane in British Columbia. These combine the sublime experience of witnessing the power of nature with risk taking and I propose both work in similar ways. They allow a closer relationship between the outer world and our inner world that gives the feeling of belonging. Drew Leder (1990: 166) proposes that aesthetic experiences encourage expansive being and that walking in the woods we can feel a leaping beyond constriction and experience our flesh and blood in chiasm with the world. Hans Jost Frey suggests of the daredevil that 'with the leap he breaks away he takes into himself the outside' (Frey 1996: 71). Both the sublime and taking risks involve opening to uncertainty, unknown and immensity of the power of the outside world. Deborah Lupton suggests that 'participants in such activities may attempt to experience the sublimity of losing their selves in the moment, of transcending the constraints of 'civilised' behaviour (2013: 207).

Scott Lash and John Urry (1994: 39) see Anthony Giddens's concept of ontological security as based in Donald Winnicott's object-relations theory (1994: 40). Ontological security is the framework that develops as an infant moves from feelings of omnipotence to recognition of the other (initially the caretaker). This is dependent on building up an internal world of certainty and anticipation that correlates with outer predictability. It is based on internal representations being continuous with external experience. In order to create this in a world increasingly populated by uncertainty and risk the individual uses 'bracketing'. This 'bracketing' could be understood in terms of Hans Jost Frey's 'whole' where the purpose of the whole was to exclude what it could not master. Frey's whole is a construct where the aim is to incorporate everything into order to create the appearance of security. The whole, however, is only an illusion and can be threatened by unmasterable elements. Both experiencing the sublime and risk taking in extreme sports encourage extension and engagement in the enormous uncertainties, unpredictability and power in the external world but internalising these brings the internal world as a closer representation to the outer world increasing feelings of belonging.

Deborah Lupton includes a specific section on 'edgework' in her chapter on risk and pleasure as a means to understand the positive dimensions of risk-taking. She suggests that edgework involves; voluntary risk-taking, the skill to negotiate danger, a motivation to 'experience intense emotion, vitality, hyper-reality and "being in the moment" and to temporarily escape the demands and alienation of the mundane everyday world' (Lupton 2013: 214). She observes the importance placed on the ability to maintain control in a situation that verges on chaos especially where it requires strength to remain calm in the face of fear. The aim is self-actualisation and to explore, 'the edges that exist along boundaries' renegotiating these boundaries in the process. In *The Aesthetics of Risk* Girda Reith (2008: 73) notes our tendency to create self-illusion of control in attributing success to skill whereas failure is attributed to external causes such as bad luck. It seems that both risk-taking and ontological security are based in a need for control; ontological security avoids the risks and unpredictability of uncertainty where risk-taking seeks control over the feelings of fear in the face of the unknown and developing skills to give a sense of control to deal with it.

risk and restriction