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‘Sponsor expectations and media interest had created a powerful death trap’: Tommy Caldwell’s The Push, Climbing, Edgework and Films about ‘Risk’

> All my life I’ve constantly refined my own sense of risk by considering not just the obvious factors – exposure, weather, rock quality, run out-but also eager, motivation, mental health, and the inevitable peer pressure (which exists, even if everyone tries to deny it). I seemed naturally able to metabolise fear; I love to suffer (selective suffering, that is) and I had excellent stamina. But I saw risking my neck on dangerous crimes are selfish, disrespectful of how my getting hurt or killed would affect my family and friends. I worried about doing something I didn’t feel was morally right enough to cash in on fame and notoriety. (Caldwell, 2017: 334)

Introduction

This chapter aims specifically to interrogate perceptions of risk as they adapt and adjust in relation to experience and mediation. Central to this interrogation is the role of the viewer when exploring the notion of ‘perceived’ risk and in particular the differences in spectatorship when the viewer is either ‘informed’ or not. This chapter primarily focusses on Tommy Caldwell’s *The Push* (2017) as a catalyst for this interrogation into risk perception beginning by exploring how Caldwell, a world-class free climber, engages with his own personal and subjective perception of professional risk. In exploring the phenomenological success of a film like *Free Solo* (2018), it is arguably the edgework in this ‘death-defying’ film which has brought it the previously unseen success and indeed the ‘cultural significance’ that has distinguished it from other climbing films. Peter Donnelly has even defined one of the fundamental characteristics of climbing as ‘the maintenance of a tension balance between difficulty and risk’ (2003: 294) but does acknowledge that all the major controversies in climbing have been ‘concerned with maintaining this tension balance’ (296). Stephen Lyng has defined much of the key work in this area such as when he proposed that ‘the voluntary pursuit of activities that involve a high potential for death, serious physical injury, or psychic harm – activities that I have termed as edgework – has acquired special cultural significance in the contemporary western world’ (Lyng, 2008: 107).

Risk

It has been suggested, and often by climbers themselves, that 'the majority of rock climbers' express motivations and experiences driven not by risk but a sense of 'flow'' (Rickly-Boyd, 2012: 86), a state which psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as one in which 'people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter' (1990: 4). Rickly-Boyd in fact builds a case that safety, or at least a sense of safety in one's climbing is essential in the ability to achieve flow suggesting that 'at least security with one's gear and partner's abilities is essential to the deep focus that results in flow' (Rickly-Boyd, 2012: 86). Tommy Caldwell, in his own book, *The Push*, questions the truth in this perception of climbing as edgework, suggesting that for him, climbing is quite conversely, particularly safe and in fact it is the media who are the culprits in producing articles about the sport with, 'absurd inaccuracies, while also portraying climbing as a sport for roulette-wheel-spinning maniacs' (Caldwell, 2017: 421). However, *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) author Robert McFarlane too perpetuates this idea of danger-seeking, considering the role played by socio-cultural change, suggesting this pursuit is a reactionary one, when he proposes in his dialogue for Jennifer Peedom's 2017 film, *Mountain*, that as "life becomes safer, we look for danger".

For Lyng, edgework and flow do differ, acknowledging the 'distortion in one's experience of space and time, feelings of transcendence, and a state of focussed attention' which comes with flow, Lyng argues that in contrast, 'edgework generates a heightened sense of self that subjects describe as a form of self-realization or self-actualization' (2008: 119). Beyond this, it is true to say that a large part of the success of these sportspeople is to be attributed to this ability to deal with risk and the fact that they 'are better able to remain calm and centered, which to the untutored observer makes them appear curiously nonchalant' (David Dornian, 2003: 283). It is the untutored observer which this chapter considers when exploring the representation of risk primarily in Caldwell's *Push* but in its cinematic adaptation, *The Dawn Wall* (2017) and in associated cinematic texts. This question of the knowing and unknowing viewer is key in the exploration of these kinds of phenomena. Certainly, the point which this chapter aims to make is one of perception and representation in terms of Stuart Hall's seminal work on 'encoding / decoding' in which he explores the notion that audiences actively decode messages according to their particular

social identity. In his work on 'misunderstandings' wherein viewers do not decode the particular embedded meaning from visual language, Hall proposes that misunderstandings most likely occur when, 'The viewer does not 'speak the language', figuratively if not literally: he or she cannot follow the complex logic of argument of exposition; or the concepts are too alien' (Hall, 1973:15).

Commercialisation

Part of the issue with the way in which these sports are perceived by specialist and non-specialist audiences, is in terms of the way in which they have been commercialised. These sports are no strangers to commercialisation, as Stephen Poulson has observed that, 'many people see no incompatibility between an adventure experience and corporate culture' (2016:26). Or such as, in the same vein, when Joanne Kay and Suzanne Laberge describe the skiing film *Warren Miller's Freeriders* (1998) as, 'the self-conscious performances in Miller's film also exemplifies quintessential capitalist kitsch, offering the viewer only a commodified tracery of the spontaneous gesture' (2003: 393). This has indeed been explored elsewhere, with scholars such as Thomas Raymen, who has written about how Parkour and other perceived 'sub-cultural' sports are founded upon neoliberal consumer capitalist forces that drive us to 'cool individualism' (2018).

This rings truest in looking at the film of Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgenson's climbing of the 'Dawn Wall'. Caldwell eventually became enormously unhappy with the role which the mainstream media played in this, to him, very personal achievement, pointing out that even before the climb began, 'a handful of people form a semi-circle around us, some snapping photos. This kind of thing never happens in our insular little climbing world. I smile bashfully. Out of politeness I shake a few hands, and then, like a skittish deer, I jog to my van' (Caldwell, 2017: 393). This overwhelming media interest came to a head once the climbers were on the wall, with Caldwell pointing the finger at even his own reliance upon the media as a problem. He describes the following situation:

> First Facebook, then the small-time paparazzi, now this. Not to mention that we have a film crew with us. What a circus. I say nothing. And then, before I know it, I'm

> fully wrapped up in surfing the web, mouthbreathing at my screen. We go an hour without saying a word.
> Wait a second, this is so messed up! I put down my phone and try to make conversation. Keven and Brett both answer me in monosyllables, then look back down at their phones (Caldwell, 2017: 393).

Similarly, Caldwell's point aligns the mediation of these sports with notion of sponsorship and athletes' responsibilities thereto. Horst Eidenmüller's paper on 'The Law and Economics of Extreme Sports Sponsoring' explores this is great depth and he too observes that in consuming these extreme sports, we as spectators are 'wired by the media to the performing athletes, creating a pernicious feedback loop of ever more risk seeking and taking in a stressful environment' (Eidenmüller, 2019:4). In this sense then, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy at work wherein the more risk taking and perceived 'adventure' takes place, the more likely it is to produce a desire to engage with more content of this kind. Authors Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek have also similarly engaged with this idea of 'adventure' in a piece suitably titled, 'Adventure without Risk Is Like Disneyland' (2005: 173). These authors, focussing in this case on white water rafting, in interviewing average customers at river guiding trips quote a customer as saying, 'let's do something fun, something that is really going to scare us' (2005:180). Critics of Tommy Caldwell's inclusion of the media in his own endeavour in free climbing the 'hardest' route up El Cap, some calling 'perhaps the most difficult free climb ever attempted' (Wilkinson, 2015). In particular, 'Spending two to three weeks on the route, surrounded by camera crews, fixed lines, and other media accoutrements; getting goodies brought up to you by friends... Doesn't something about all that seem a little out of place in the middle of El Capitan?'' Chris Kalman, a climber, asked on his blog, Fringe's Folly. ''Where, I repeat, is the adventure?'' (ibid). Clearly the repeated idea of tension balance reappears here, and for Kalman, this tension in risk versus reward (adventure) is softened, diluted or even erased altogether by the mediation of the event; quite pointedly, this is the presence of cameras. Holyfield, Jonas and Zajicek too engage with this idea of tension, where, for them, 'Providing white water adventure to those who otherwise would not experience the river sometimes creates significant tension between the twin imperatives for safety and uncertainty' (2005: 181). Whether there is a pleasure to be found in this pursuit of risk or not, it is clear that doing, or for the purpose of this chapter, reading something or watching something that is 'really going to scare us' (180) is a

big part of our regular lives. Deborah Lupton succinctly observes this ever-present fear as, in her own terms:

> 'Contemporary experts and popular cultures tend to represent risk as negative, something to be avoided. So too, much of the academic literature on risk represents individuals in late modernity as living in fear, constantly dogged by feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and uncertainty in relation to the risks of which they are constantly made aware' (2013: 203).

Evidently, whilst the media interest in these pursuits is damaging and almost suffocating at times, it has, to a certain extent, begun to transform this 'insular little climbing world' into a global phenomenon (Caldwell, 2017: 393).

Audiences

What emerges, in a sense, surrounding the central concern of perception, is the point that there is a certain amount of pre-knowledge, or at least, assumed knowledge, required to fully comprehend what we are experiencing in these written and filmed memoirs or else there is a distinct chance that audiences will experience what Stuart Hall termed 'misunderstandings'. In this case, these misunderstandings ally themselves to the idea of safety and thus to the perception of the level of risk. Here again, this 'untutored viewer' engages in a very different mode of spectatorship in engaging with these texts. In this sense then, it is enormously important that the audience for these films be taken into keen consideration when trying to understand the texts themselves, exploring what Judith Mayne has perceptively called, 'the need to understand just how and why ideological systems interpellate their subjects so effectively' and to study, 'how film-goers become subjects, how the various devices and components of the cinema function to create ideological subjects' (1993:14). Films of this kind tend to be celebrated by the climbing community and as such as the more popular[1] texts which have provoked this study have some ability to transcend these humbler origins, they call particular attention to themselves.

[1] That is to say, the texts which have been viewed by non-specialist audiences, outside of the climber-specific contexts. For this sake of this study that constitutes *Free Solo* and *The Dawn Wall.*

As a useful analog, historically, the 'cult cinema' is often categorised as a community, and scholars similarly exclaim the attraction of these kinds of 'cult films' as being characterised by their active and lively communal followings. In fact, it seems that this is an enormous part of the climbing film too. One might look simply towards the International Alliance for Mountain Film who state themselves that their goal is to 'to promote, enhance and conserve mountain cinematography' (2022). The IAMF are an alliance which consists of 27 members of which 26 are 'Mountain Film' festivals and one 'Mountain Film Museum', across twenty countries. The IAMF also celebrated *Free Solo* as a bastion of this film genre, suggesting that:

> 'Never before, has mountain cinema attracted such large audiences. The work of the IAMF and its members is a long-term contribution to increasing public attention to mountain film. This is a fantastic prize for the mountain world!' (IAMF 2019).

In addition, one of the most significant communal followings with regards to climbing films, comes in the guise of festival film tours from the Banff Mountain Film Festival, the Kendal Mountain Festival, London Mountain Film Festival and the European Outdoor Film Tour to the Reel Rock film festival. Award-winning climbing filmmakers Josh Lowell and Peter Mortimer, who most notably directed *The Dawn Wall* amongst many others, having promoted the release of their own climbing films, began a tour of similar films focussed on climbing:

> Lowell and Mortimer realized the huge demand for exciting live events in the outdoors community and combined forces to create The Reel Rock Film Tour in 2006. In 2018 the REEL ROCK Tour included over 500 screenings world-wide and was seen by more than 75,000 people. This year's Reel Rock 14 Tour promises to be even bigger and better! (Reel Rock 2019).

Considering the dual concepts of spectatorship and differing notions of perception, one can observe that the simplicity in *Free Solo*, for example, speaks to its success, in that it is perceived by mny in the same way. The reality then, pertains more to the phenomenological understanding of these texts, as Malin Wahlberg suggested that:

> Cinematic representations are epistemologically related to the spectator's language, ideological beliefs, and aesthetic sensibilities or the unconscious thought processes such as desire and expectation (Wahlberg, 2008: 123).

In a sense then, with the conflicting notion of the knowing and the uninitiated viewer, this idea of competing perceptions begins to make sense of the conception of spectatorship as a form of commodification and allows us to explore the impact this has on the phenomenological experience. Therefore, one might expect that, if the spectator needs the right 'language' to properly and thoroughly enjoy these films, when the concept is more universal, as in *Free Solo,* the audience is simply bigger. Interestingly, 2018 was not the first time that Honnold had taken part in a 'free soloing' documentary. One important consideration here is the suggestion that watching, for example, *Honnold 3.0* a 2007 Sender Films documentary, it is more difficult for non-climbing audiences without the knowledge required of climbing skills and cultures, to enjoy. Here Honnold solo climbs three of Yosemite National Park's biggest peaks, El Cap, Half Dome and Mount Watkins, within just 24 hours, being not just the first person to climb these three peaks solo, but also setting a speed climbing record along the way. The reality here is that Alex 'solos' these climbs but does not 'free solo' them. Honnold 'daisy solos' these climbs, meaning that he takes with him two short loops of webbing or strap chord with carabiners on either end. Rather than using a rope, he simply clips himself into the wall at various points using these 'daisy chains' to secure himself to existing bolts on the rock face. There is, however, always a point where Alex is not clipped to anything and is therefore effectively 'free soloing'. The argument here might be that this type of climbing is too complicated and not so readily perceived by both skilled and unskilled audiences alike. Free Solo does the typical Hollywood thing in that it is perceived by everyone in the same way. This knowingness, or 'insider knowledge', cannot be disregarded as a component of success here. One sees a clear resonance of this in one of the more telling quotations from Chin and Vasarhelyi's film wherein Tommy Caldwell, a fellow internationally regarded free climber, suggests that this knowingness, this, to some extent, required vocabulary, plays a large part in the perception of what it is that Alex Honnold was doing, suggesting that, "people who know a little bit about climbing are like, yeah he's safe, he says he's got it. People who know exactly what he's doing are *freaked out*!". Ultimately, this tension balance is a matter of fine-tuning to find the right mixture of adventure and risk for the spectator. However, some critics have accused the *Free Solo*

directors of going too far, or perhaps tipping the scales for the wrong reasons; more pointedly 'Vasarhelyi and Chin milk this death-defying endeavour for all the suspense they can' (Benson-Allott, Caetlin, 2019: 68). This is yet another process of commodifying risk. Benson-Allot goes on to make clear the element of 'marketing' ingrained in this kind of spectatorship relationship which she keenly identifies as a 'contract':

> The film's marketing materials, however, prominently feature Chin and Vasarhelyi questioning their decisions, "Is it ethical to film someone as he risks his life?" Vasarhelyi asks in the *New York Times* op-doc that she and Chin created about *Free Solo.* They then sidestep their responsibility, contending, "That is, in part, a question for our audiences." (2019: 70-71).

Tensions

When defining 'risk' then, and re-stating Donnelly's notion of the 'tension balance between difficulty and risk' (2003: 294), one must consider, for whom these behaviours are seen as risky. Writing of Mary Douglas' approach to the study of risk, Deborah Lupton points out the following:

> Risk, for Douglas, is a contemporary Western strategy for dealing with danger and Otherness. Much of her writings on risk seek to explain why it is that some dangers are identified as 'risks' and others are not. Her main explanations revolve around the importance for social groups, organizations or societies to maintain the boundaries between self and Other, deal with social deviance and achieve social order. (Lupton, 2013:52)

Thus, it is a question of perspective and position. By the same token Caldwell often points out these differing perceptions of risk and safety. In *The Push* he points out his own calculated position on 'risk' when he writes that 'Early on I was learning that risk and recklessness are two entirely different things. We were never raised to be thrill seekers and adrenaline junkies' (30).

Not to mention the notion that, indeed, these are professional athletes who are acclimatised as much to height as they are to risk. For these professionals, the notion of risk is seen differently than it is for non-specialist audiences:

> The exposure had become comfortable, like mounting a fast motorcycle and then taking it for a slow speed. The feelings of fear had passed years ago, replaced by only a twinge of excitement. High on the walls is my rightful place in this world (Caldwell, 2017: 194)

Motivation

Horst Eidenmüller has argued that, in reference to Sebastian Haag and Andrea Zambaldi's death in a climb on Nepal's 'Shishapangma' that, 'Personal ambition, cognitive biases, sponsor expectations and media interest had created a powerful death trap' and goes on to refer to a further, 'seven athletes who died in the last 10 years on three different continents when practicing extreme sports' (2019: 2). Whilst this opens up the exploration of the particularly significant element of 'sponsor expectations' the question of why athletes pursue the inherent risk we see is one of interest. This chapter doesn't seek to ask why climbers seek out risk; in fact, this author is not convinced that they do. In solidarity with Caldwell's book wherein the climber points out that for him, 'climbing was about taking a stimulating and potentially dangerous environment and then using our heads, our attentiveness, and our skills to make it safe (30)' this chapter is concerned only with the awareness and mediation of that perceived risk by uninitiated spectators. However, as the question of 'why' is so ready on so many lips, it does shed some light on the desire to understand why risk has come so spectacularly evident in climbing literature and cinema.

Exploring the ideas of motivation, too, is integral to this idea of negotiating risk and reward. George Mallory's now enormously famous quote, when asked why he climbed Mount Everest, was to retort, "Because it was there" (1923). Tommy Langseth and Øyvind Salvesen are scholars who have sought to investigate the relationship between risk and motivation in a fascinating study. In their article on 'Rock Climbing, Risk and Recognition' for the journal, *Frontiers in Psychology* argue to the contrary that, 'climbers do not climb because the mountain "is there" but because other people "are there," that means that we will explore the social component of risk-taking behavior in regard to climbing' (2018: 1). From this perspective then, it is therefore a matter of perception and mediation that can be read as driving this pursuit for risk. Although, the authors propose that, 'a climber accepting that recognition is a driving force behind her or his action would be accepting the

motivation does not come from "within." (2018: 6). Herein lies an interesting question of 'why' climbers seek out this risk? For Caldwell, in his own writing on the mediation of risk in his personal climbing achievements, the endeavour to better oneself and improve upon previous levels of success and achievement in climbing is not necessarily a matter of taking more and more risk but in fact seeking to prove his 'worth' to others; not because the climbing is there but because 'other people "are there"' (Langseth and Salvesen, 2018: 1). Caldwell wrote, in regards to further challenging himself and tackling the 'most difficult climb ever attempted' that:

> This route was a notch harder than any of the others I had previously done on El Cap. It would be a new level for my climbing, and prove to others, and to myself, that I could still be a professional climber. I'd demonstrate that I was in control of my life again (2017: 156)

Perhaps here then, even Caldwell is buying into the spectatorship in as much as he desires to be seen and recognised – thus legitimised – for his achievements, an in this sense Caldwell too is commodifying this risk. As early as 1923 commentators were noticing the risk associated with this pursuit of the mountains and so too did these authors question the motivation of non-specialist climbers venturing into the mountains. For the New York Times this columnist in a piece calling out the 'hazards of the Alps' questions why tourists were mounting the peaks of Chamonix, suggesting that, 'it is considered a reproach for an athletic man or woman not to venture the ascent of Mont Blanc' (1923 NYTimes). The author does pose, but tellingly does not answer, the question of 'can climbing in the Alps ever be considered accident-proof?'. But nonetheless whilst decrying the increasing mortality rate amongst people scaling the mountains the author does in fact reinforce the notion of risk and reward observing, in reference to the beauty and splendour of the local landscape, whilst most tourists elect to view the mountain range from the safety of the valleys, 'this is not to say that the thrill of braving the hazards of the ascent and looking down on the tiny chalets of Chamonix and far and wide over the field of mountains is not the finer emotion' (1923 NYTimes). Risk vs reward thus is almost reified here and certainly elevated in creating a somewhat hegemonic distance between mere tourists and the superhuman mountaineers prepared to take on danger in order to reap a greater and more significant reward; in some sense living a better life than mere mortals, reinforcing the sovereignty afforded to specific

bodies; white male European, Western bodies. To this same end, Jennifer Jordan in her 2010 book of Dudley Wolf's mountaineering, *The Last Man on the Mountain: The Death of an American Adventurer on K2,* she establishes Wolf's death on KS by quoting Charles s. Houston's 1938 K2 diary in which he writes:

> Is it not better to take risks…than die within from rot? Is it not better to change one's life completely than to wait for the brain to set firmly and irreversibly in one way of life and one environment? I think it is…taking risks, not for the sake of danger alone, but for the sake of growth, is more important than any security one can buy or inherit (143).

What is interesting in this sense of negotiating the precarious balance between risk and adventure purely as an entertainment phenomenon is that whilst one might initially consider that the responsibility lies squarely on the shoulders of the audience; of spectators, in fact, it ought to be understood that the filmmakers and media outlets in and of themselves hold a greater deal of responsibility in marketing the reception of these pursuits; they too commodify the sport or leisure activity. To an extent, films like *Free Solo* and *Dawn Wall,* texts which phenomenologically have risen above the constraints of an 'insular little climbing world (Caldwell, 2017: 393) might more usefully be read as 'media events'. This of course is a term reserved for television viewing in particular, events which Daniel Dayan, Elihu Katz and Elihu Katz describe as, 'the festive viewing of television […] those historic occasions […] that are televised as they take place and transfix a nation or the world' (Dayan, Katz and Katz, 1992: 1). But if we suppose to transpose this phrase into cinema language the idea of the spectacle, and indeed 'festive' viewing of these films becomes pointed. Particularly indeed if one sees these films within the context of the festival viewing space so integral to the success of the genre. Similarly, Freddie Wilkinson writing about Caldwell's *Dawn Wall* for the *New York Times* in 2015 said that, 'the anticipation and spectacle surrounding it — an adventure that, thanks to cellphones, social media and the Internet, has been shared by millions of people — surpass anything imaginable in Mr. Harding's[2] day' (2015). This experience, enhanced by technological developments delivers

[2] Warren Harding was the first person to climb El Cap's 'The Dawn Wall', in 1970, using 'aid climbing' techniques (hammering hardware into the wall to pull oneself upwards) as opposed to Tommy

to spectators the phenomenological experience of the thrill and an experience of the sublime, but, as the uninitiated, only from a safe distance. Furthermore, for Wilkinson, 'technology and the media may bring viewers closer than ever before to these intense endeavors, but in Mr. Harding's day, they could have the curious effect of dehumanizing both the personalities and the experience' (2015). What is interesting to engage with here is the point that there is a responsibility to be shared in creating the tension of risk in order to demonstrate a kind of marketable spectatorial experience for audiences. It is in fact the 'death-defying' nature of *Free Solo* that makes it so attractive a viewing experience. In fact, in his book about Honnold's free solo climb, Mark Synott points out that 'by 2015, it wasn't just possible for professional climbers to keep their fans appraised of their exploits in real time; it was expected. Endorsement contracts often included stipulations about social media: how often to post, which hashtags to use, and even creative guidelines' (Synott, 2018: 198-199).

Responsibility

There is the sense that too much risk can of course be unsettling, and whilst that unsettling feeling is one that many spectators pursue and enjoy, as will be explored late in this chapter, the disease of these kinds of films is not without precedent. My own experience of watching Honnold free soloing the 3000 ft, around 900 meters, of Yosemite National Park peak, El Capitan on the big screen in the cinema was received with squeals and screams from other cinema-goers. Indeed, one of the most significant tropes of what can be termed 'extreme cinema' 'is its potential to elicit affect' (Kerner and Knapp, 2016: 156). Extreme cinema is seen more commonly as 'films that have pushed against, if not breached conventions regarding treatment of sex and violence in the cinema' (ibid: 1). This author does not intend to refer to climbing films' portrayal of risk as 'violent' but does observe, in films such as *Free Solo* and *The Dawn Wall,* a clear push-back against, and to some extent a breach of, convention. What is interesting, however, is that in their exploration of *Extreme Cinema,* scholars Aaron Michael Kerner and Jonatha L. Knapp

Caldwell's 'free climbing' (using just hands and feet to move upwards with the rope and removable hardware for safety only) approach.

acknowledge the specificities of particular audiences in the reception of these kinds of films, pointing out that:

> Submitting the affective referent to the analytic gaze wields the potential to neutralize that which spawns sensation. Furthermore, the affective experience is hardly universal, and although we have perhaps over- "idealized" the affective as pan-cultural in certain instances, it is clear that it is subject to cultural, historical and personal mediation (2016: 156)

This 'personal mediation' as they experience it is cleanly aligned with the idea of the untutored observer in the climbing film, evidently impacting the notion of affect in differing spectators. In a sense it is important that the audience and the filmmaker, in purely metaphorical terms, 'speak the same language'.

Benson-Allott, in her exploration of *Free Solo* as tantamount to a 'snuff film' accuses the filmmakers of violating a kind of spectatorial contract with the viewer in not acknowledging the central focus on death; as the author claims, 'I could no longer trust Vasarhelyi and Chin to deliver the safe spectoral experience I'd expected' (Benson-Allott, 2019: 68). For Benson-Allott the seeking of risk for climbing films did not pay off, building the case for the argument here that more risk does not in fact equal more reward for spectators, and indeed those untutored observers in particular, are concerned. There is in fact a certain morbid curiosity ingrained in the human condition which might account for the interest in this kind of risk-taking cinema. To echo Tommy Caldwell's reaction to Honnold's climb from the film itself, on the one hand interest comes in the guise of viewers who believe Honnold is simply a sports person at the top of his profession doing what he does best, and on the other hand there are viewers, like Benson-Allott who see this as 'threaten[ing] the viewer with psychic harm' (Benson-Allott: 73). Psychologically speaking, research does suggest that as humans we are predisposed to 'potentially dangerous phenomena' (Scrivner, 2021: 1) and in particular, much like looking at a car crash, 'This is true even when the phenomenon is unpleasant; indeed, pleasantness appears to be unrelated to interestingness' (ibid). More pointedly, in a paper exploring the measurement of morbid curiosity, Coltan Scrivner makes it clear that:

> Morbid curiosity is colloquially described as an interest in or curiosity about unpleasant things, especially death. While psychologists have extensively explored

> how the mind deals with death (e.g., Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015) and curiosity has been investigated in a variety of research programs (e.g., Kidd & Hayden, 2015; Loewenstein, 1994), they have largely overlooked morbid curiosity as a topic of study. (2021: 2).

Indeed, as the field of psychology has largely overlooked the facets of morbid curiosity as an element of the human condition it is nonetheless important here. In fact, what makes Scrivner's work particularly salient for the focus of this chapter is his exploration of what he sees as the first psychological paper on morbid curiosity by Zuckerman and Litle in 1986, in which they developed the 'Curiosity About Morbid Events (CAME) scale' (Zuckerman and Litle, 1986) on which, most interestingly, 'scores on the CAME scale positively correlated with sensation seeking' (Scrivner, 2021: 2). In this case then, from the perspective of climbing filmmakers in particular, there is indeed a reward to be found in seeking risk, particularly that of the risk of death. What these films need to do, is to negotiate this risk, to toe the line as it were, in order to negotiate an experience wherein a viewer - and in order to attract a larger viewership and thus more financial success, an untutored viewer – can enjoy this pursuit of edgework without experiencing a 'psychic harm'. This seems a particularly difficult balance; indeed, a balance which Lowell and Mortimer have well-struck in *The Dawn Wall,* but one which, for Benson-Allot at least, Vaserhali and Chin have misjudged with *Free Solo.* Benson-Allot does acknowledge the role of the filmmaker's in her perfectly reasonable response to the film when she suggests that:

> Chin and Vasarhelyi defuse the issue of culpability in *Free Solo* by allowing Honnold to articulate ethics as a question of performance. He laments how "messed up" it would be for him to fall in front of his friends and their cameras, because "nobody wants to see that" (Benson-Allott, Caetlin, 2019: 70).

Whilst the film is evidently predominantly well-received with its enormous acclaim including an Oscar, a BAFTA, 7 EMMYs and more; this perspective is not unique to Benson-Allott. Exploring the spectacle of *Free Solo,* Joseph E. Taylor points out the absurdity that in the film, 'no one will call Honnold selfish' (Taylor, 2020: 375). And it is not just audiences who fall foul of the perception of risk in these films. Sponsors too become, if not culpable, certainly responsible and have addressed this balance in the past. Sponsors are indeed

responsible for this commodification of risk in their constant search for new resources to fuel the growth economics of consumer capitalism. Caldwell himself critiques this relationship between sponsorship and risk when he considers his younger partner on the wall, Kevin Jorgenson, observing in his behaviours that, 'Many more, in particular younger, athletes compete for sponsorships, and they have to take ever higher risks to catch the attention of (potential) sponsors and the general public' (2019: 3). It is obvious of course, that sponsored athlete do need to avoid activities that would harm their sponsors; in fact, as Eidenmüller has explored in particular relation to the economics of 'extreme sports', 'a great majority of sponsored athletes are bound by a "moral clause". Athletes must not behave in a way detrimental to their sponsor's interests, such as talking poorly about the product, modifying the product or covering the product' (Eidenmüller, 211). This has reared its head with climbing, most obviously when Clif Bar[3] dropped several climbers from their brand. In 2014 the brand released the following statement:

> We understand that some climbers feel these forms of climbing are pushing the sport to new frontiers. But we no longer feel good about benefitting from the amount of risk certain athletes are taking in areas of the sport where there is no margin for error; where there is no safety net (Clif Bar Releases Statement… *Climbing*)

What is interesting is the climbers' responses to sponsors withdrawing from contracts. Dean Potter, another famous free solo climber and a friend of Alex Honnold's who died wing suit flying in 2015 called the sponsors actions ''a huge emotional blow'' (A Spopnsor Steps Away From the Edge, 2014). Interestingly, whilst Clif Bar never gave a reason for their change in direction, Dean Potter accused the sponsor of reacting to Peter Mortimer, Nick Rosen's film *Valley Uprising* (2014) which details the history of climbing in the Yosemite Valley, including footage of free soloing. This speaks, of course, to the power and influence of these films and the effects which this delicate balance of negotiation between risk and 'adventure'. Giving credence to the complicated notion that more risk equals more reward, Alex Honnold's own response to the sponsor, in an op-ed for Sports Illustrated, was to suggest that sponsors

[3] Clif Bar & Company is an American company that produces energy foods and drinks.

refusing to support risky climbing behaviours like soloing could make the sport 'more sterile' (2014). For the *New York Times* Honnold engages here, more with the notion of personal policing and speaks to the ways in which he is skilled enough to compartmentalise the risk in his climbing, knowing his own limits and 'drawing his own lines':

> 'soloing appeals to me for a variety of reasons: the feeling of mastery that comes from taking on a big challenge, the sheer simplicity of the movement, the experience of being in such an exposed position. Those reasons are a powerful enough motivation for me to take certain risks. But it's a personal decision, and one that I consider carefully before any serious ascent (2014).

Conclusion

What is more, engaging with this negotiated balance, is something to which Caldwell gives a great deal of attention in his mountaineering memoir *The Push* where he gives great thought to the logical conclusion of greater risk; death at the hands of the mountain:

> Sport climbing is safe. Its controlled. It's great. But how far do you take it? He saw my drive and toughness and he feared that my ambitions would push me closer to the Alpine round and leave me to distant and dangerous summits. Too many climbers he'd known had died this way (2017: 92).

Maybe much like these filmmakers, these is a more egocentric reasoning behind the pursuit of risk for these climbers. Much like the extreme cinema, where 'distributors in fact have used "extreme" as a marketing device' (Kerner and Knapp, 2016: 157) which ultimately encourages viewers to, as Kerner and Knapp put it, 'read these films through a particular lens' (ibid) so too does the climbing film's mediation of 'risk' encourage audiences to do the same. There is a real concern in the commodification of risk, as it pertains to spectatorship and phenomenological experiences. Filmmakers, authors, biographers, sponsors and even viewers are guilty of this force of commodification and yet what is missed often is the nuance in the differing experiences across diverse audiences when exposed to high-end professional athleticism. If one were to seek an answer to the unposed question of why it is that some of these films have indeed transcended the 'insular little climbing world'

(Caldwell, 2017: 393), the more successful commodification of risk is one compelling response and yet Caldwell's own book and the accompanying film speak to a different experience of risk, even if he is occasionally, as we have seen here, guilty of commodifying the risk experience himself.

For Caldwell, in his book he spends much time engaging with the 'control', 'heightened awareness' and even at one point the sense of 'invincibility' (240) that risk affords him as a climber but at least in negotiating his own culpability in the potentially dangerous hazards in this tightrope walking in balancing the risk vs reward elements of climbing which ultimately comes down to the pursuit of pleasure:

> 'Perhaps more than most pursuits, climbing is self-glorifying and self-serving. As we ascend, we risk becoming our own gods' (Caldwell, 2017:203).

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