Climbing Monsters: Excess and Restraint in Contemporary Rock Climbing

IAN HEYWOOD
Faculty of Arts and Society, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK
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ABSTRACT
The tension in rock climbing between technical aspects of performance that do not involve risk, and preparedness to put oneself in considerable and even life-threatening danger, is explored through an analysis of extreme gritstone climbing in the late 1990s recorded in a successful ‘cult’ film Hard Grit. The film dramatises self-imposed danger, and connects it to the history and myths of gritstone climbing, an emphasis best seen as a specific moment in the oscillation in climbing between the technical dimension (or bodily techne) and ‘bottle’ (spiritedness or thumos), but it has wider implications. The theoretical background is the Weberian theme of rationalisation qualified, however, by the social and cultural significance of imprudence, irresponsibility and deliberate transgression throughout the modern period. As late modernity reveals new consequences for societies and cultures beyond the reach of either comprehensive reason in a classical sense or a self-imposed rational order along Enlightenment lines, the play of techne and thumos becomes potentially unlimited and thus monstrous. How, then, should climbers and their very loosely organised, minority pursuit, govern themselves? How can climbing remain authentic, true to itself? After an exploration of some theoretical aspects, the essay concludes more practically by proposing that two features of everyday rock climbing operate as ethical sources: confidence in sound judgment by the imagined future community of climbers; and a ‘phenomenological’ turn to the natural and sensory preconditions of climbing. These sources cannot, however, fully govern climbing culture but operate only in tension with fundamentally unruly impulses and drives.

KEYWORDS: hard grit; thumos; techne; rationalisation; transgression; moderation; everyday life; moral resources

I
Consider us and what we are: we are not well-balanced individuals, as long as we climb, because we have committed ourselves to a pure sphere of self-assertion and will. (Perrin, 1986: p. 185)

This paper explores a contrast running through all forms of climbing: that between the technical, cognitive, and deliberative aspects of the sport – training, know-how, the systematic development of bodily capacities and skills, the informed use of
equipment, etc. — and ‘bottle’, a willingness to put oneself in danger, the drive to
push beyond what has been done before, beyond existing physical and mental
limits. In more philosophical terms, this is a difference between techne and thumos.
In Plato’s Republic, thumos means pugnacity, the drive to overcome and subdue,
and in Britain gritstone outcrops have been the location par excellence in which thumos has been dramatised, not only for the direct participants but also the wider
audience of climbers. This suggests looking at the gritstone edges of the Dark Peak
and Yorkshire as a stage upon which a dangerous, sometimes obsessive, struggle
is played out in the context of a modern society for which rational prudence and
responsibility are enormously important public virtues (Chaney, 1993, 2002). The
paper scrutinises two concrete phenomena in order to explore deeper cultural
strata: episodes of hard and dangerous gritstone climbing in the late 1990s; and
Hard Grit, a ‘cult’ film that recorded some of them.

It is important to see that the courting of risk in climbing, an expression of
thumos, is not simply impulsive or foolhardy. While anyone can go and get them-
selves killed on steep rock, the social reality of high performance, high risk, climbing
involves exacting physical and mental preparation, considerable knowledge,
and a careful calculation of the odds. It is this that I am interpreting as bodily,
practical techne; that is, deliberated, embodied action on the basis of knowledge,
training, experience, and technical refinement. Techne here includes more than
just ‘technology’ or what climbers call ‘technique’ (Heidegger, 1977). For climb-
ing as a social activity, the essential context of thumos, the decision to put bodily
wellbeing in jeopardy is embodied techne.

Neither thumos nor techne alone define the core of the activity. Rather, there is
within climbing a constant oscillation between the two (Donnelly, 2003). However,
climbing and climbers would be diminished were this play between techne and spir-
itedness to become total and definitive. A climber exclusively devoted to the culti-
vation of techne and the free play of thumos would be dominated by compulsive
behaviour, either technical or neurotic. My final question is, then, what aspects of
climbing – and more specifically, what kind of care – could reduce this threat?

The intellectual background to the essay has several aspects. First, it responds to
a general interest in the moral condition of late modernity seen in part from socio-
logical and cultural perspectives (Taylor, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Pippin, 1991; Beck,
1992; Benhabib, 1992; Bauman, 1993; Larmore, 1996; Heller, 1999; Lash, 1999;
Rosen, 1999). Chris Jenks has recently proposed that modernity ‘has unintention-
ally generated an ungoverned desire to extend, exceed, or go beyond the margins
of acceptable or normal performance. Transgression therefore becomes a primary
postmodern topic and a responsible one’ (Jenks, 2003: p. 8). The film Hard Grit
records just this excessive or transgressive behaviour with regard to ‘normal’ climb-
ing, and provides a useful point from which to reflect upon both the current social
condition of this sport and the broader question of the relationship between trans-
gression and acceptable or normal performance.

Second, the essay seeks to explore moral and experiential sources that perform
a moderating, and indeed moralising, function for climbing in particular. This
implies a critical response to the view that ordinary moral resources residing in
different, sequestered, spheres of everyday life, but now assailed by relativism,
socio-cultural fragmentation, radical commodification, and individualisation, are
as a result in a state of acute crisis or terminal decline. The larger issues to which
the essay alludes, and which could only be dealt with explicitly in a different
context, are modernity's progressive reduction of the soul to the body, and the
phenomenon of embodiment then appearing as subject to an antinomy.

On the one hand, from the perspective of the ongoing modernisation process
(Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Lash, 1999), the body is the object
of further reflexive rationalisation, its essential plasticity enabling it to be moulded
into an ever more efficient and effective resource for action or pleasure. The
scientific, technical, and social innovations of continued modernisation, and their
unpredictable consequences, mean that deliberate, well-informed risk-taking has
become a necessary part of individual and organisational life (Beck, 1992; Beck
et al., 1994). On the other hand, and associated with postmodernism and the philos-
ophy of difference, the full immanent significance of the body is interpreted as an
expression of polymorphous desire which is, as Felix Guattari puts it, 'everything
that exists before the opposition between subject and object, before representation
and production' (Stambolian & Marks, 1990: pp. 56–69).

While postmodernists have often celebrated 'difference as difference', from the
point of view of further reflexive modernisation this 'desire beyond reason' is
concretely indistinguishable from obsessive-compulsive behaviour, in the case of
certain kinds of climbing an 'addiction' to dangerous or even life-threatening
situations. As Al Alvarez puts it: 'For some people, climbing can be an addiction
that alters the psyche's chemistry as surely as heroin alters the body's' (Alvarez,
2003: p. 18). 2 Seen thus, the response to risk of Hard Grit type climbing is not
premised on a combination of calculation – judiciously weighing the odds of
success – and systematic, technical performance improvement, but rather a
neurotic symptom of some kind or, at a more cultural level, the expression of a
nihilistic cult of avoidable danger. Yet over and above the question of whether
particular individuals succumb to obsessive-compulsive behaviour, the larger issue
is the condition of the sport as a whole. If climbing is to avoid falling for distorted
images of itself, forceful or erotic exaggerations of one of its component features,
upon what moral sources must it rely?

Third, the essay is intended to be an exercise in the empirical and practical
interpretation of a cultural sector, informed by many years of reflective participa-
tion. The approach adopted owes something to Elias and Dunning's (1986) search
within different sports for economies of balance and restraint, although clearly
climbing presents the tradition of figurational sociology with specific challenges.
In particular, it is difficult to apply to climbing a key idea like 'mimesis', however
useful it may be to understanding the internal dynamics of other sports. While
climbing has dramatically increased in popularity in recent years, and is certainly
subject to considerable commercial exploitation by companies manufacturing and
marketing equipment and clothing, it has so far proved generally unattractive to
mainstream television or mass audiences (Dorian, 2003). 3 Climbing is still over-
whelmingly a participant rather than a spectator sport, hence the sophisticated tech-
nical apparatuses, the codes of representation, the commentators and experts, all
the machinery of modern mimesis for large audiences, are largely absent. In addi-
tion, the core experience of climbing is to do with a real relationship with the mate-
rial world and gravity, not an imaginary or symbolic one with other human beings.
However, I hope to show some of the ways in which imagination and a social dimension remain important to climbing.

Finally, I do not intend to 'theorise' climbing from a sociological or cultural theoretical position external to its life world, but rather to see what light might be shed by colliding images, ideas and values from the everyday life of climbing recognisable as such by most climbers, with some philosophical and theoretical notions pertinent to an investigation of larger tensions within modernity and modern culture. The three sections are loosely related and, in keeping with the topic, the argument is playful rather than systematic.

II

The great forms which shape the substance of life are the syntheses, antagonisms, or compromises between chance and necessity. Adventure is such a form. (Simmel, 1997: p. 224)

Climbing in the UK has for two decades been dogged by a controversy between 'sport' and 'adventure' variants (Heywood, 1994). Although a kind of pragmatic settlement has recently emerged, a brief review of some key terms will serve as an introduction to what I want to discuss in respect of extreme gritstone climbing and the 1998 film Hard Grit made by Richard Heap and Mark Turnbull.

Searching for a name for itself in recent years, the mainstream British approach to rock climbing has come up with 'adventure' (or 'traditional') climbing. Ideal-type adventure climbing occurs when climbs — either single or multi-pitch — are ascended 'on sight' (no previous inspection or rehearsal), ground-up, and with the leader protecting him/herself with hand-placed, removable equipment, assuming that there are suitable 'placements' (e.g. cracks, natural spikes of rock) available. In theory such 'gear' will prevent the leader hitting the ground in the event of a fall, assuming that it can be suitably placed and that it does not 'rip' out under the huge forces generated by a falling body.4

In the UK, adventure climbing is certainly the main historical tradition and form of the sport pursued by the vast majority of climbers. There exist thousands of such climbs, at varying levels of difficulty, which can be made reasonably safe using normal gear in natural features. But there are also routes, again from very easy to great difficulty, which cannot be made safe. It is the latter with which Hard Grit is concerned, that is, very difficult and dangerous climbs. To fall on lead is to risk serious injury or death.

As a film Hard Grit is technically quite simple, with a maximum of two or three cameras for any one sequence. It runs for 64 minutes. The soundtrack is largely voice-over with some interview material, and a musical ‘dance’ accompaniment. The opening sequence, accompanied by quickening heartbeats, culminates in Jean-Minh Trin-Thieu taking a long fall from Gaia, and certainly grabs the attention of the viewer. Yet the overall visual appearance of the film is prosaic, with natural lighting, largely static camera positions and sustained shots of climbing moves; certainly not the hyperactive voyeurism of the ‘MTV’ style associated with predominant representations of so-called ‘extreme sport’. There seems to be little artifice in how it presents the climbing; glitz, glamour and ‘cool’ are notably absent. In commercial terms the production costs were evidently modest, but the film and video version have been a considerable critical and commercial success.
In 2002 the magazine On the Edge reported Richard Heap's estimate that Hard Grit had sold 12,000 video copies, somewhat to the surprise of its makers. While sponsors are listed in the credits, the only products that a climber could easily recognise are the 5.10 climbing shoes worn by several activists and some items of Ben Moon's S7 clothing range.

Most sequences begin with the climber and team of spotters gathered below the route. The action of the film records 'headpoint' and mostly repeat ascents of some of the hardest and most serious gritstone routes. Relationships between climbers, supporters and film crew are jovially informal. Climbers climb and cameras follow the action. Attempts are made, through close ups of gnarled, chalked-up fingers, to give the audience a sense of the paucity of holds on such routes. We witness initial failure almost as often as eventual success, although we are also left in no doubt that these climbers are at the 'cutting edge' of their sport.

Overall, one feels that Hard Grit looks as it does – a bit like a very competent 'home movie', the kind of thing that digital cameras and desktop editing software have made accessible to many – not only because lavish resources were unavailable, but also because its makers wanted to convey the spontaneity and down to earth style of the Sheffield milieu from which the majority of the climbers come. Its outlook and assumptions make it very much an 'insiders', piece, with few concession to a mass audience; this increases its sense of gritty authenticity.

We must now briefly consider the importance, to gritstone climbing of myth and history, and then the relationship between what I have been referring to as technical aspects of high performance climbing and having the bottle to go out and do it. The hardest gritstone routes and those climbing them have enjoyed in their day an extraordinary aura. In the 1950s and early 1960s the gritstone gods were Joe Brown and Don Whillans, and in 1970s Steve Bancroft and John Allen. The film's commentary dates the advent of today's definition of hard grit to Johnny Woodward's ascent of Beau Geste in 1982, opening the way for the legendary feats of Jerry Moffat, Simon Nadin, Johnny Dawes and John Dunne. The filmmakers are highly aware of grit's fabulous narrative, the commentary reminding us more than once of the 'almost mythical world of hard gritstone climbing'.

Having said this, the film includes a lengthy historical introduction that takes gritstone climbing from its beginnings in the 19th-century through to today. This section is quite playful, with jocund costumed ascents shot in grainy, flickering black and white, but not at the expense of objectivity. Considerable respect is shown to the gritstone ancestors, even though it is well known that yesterday's elite test pieces often become in due course an easy stroll for the punters. Thus the film manages to encompass both the historical and the mythical in a quite satisfying way, and this self-conscious, playful shifting between facts and lore is quite characteristic of ordinary climbing culture.

The climbers are invited to say what they think hard grit is. To paraphrase: 'it's putting yourself in dangerous situations, pushing yourself to your absolute limit', 'persuading yourself you aren't in danger when you are', 'elitism', 'the victory of imagination and will over sober realism', 'a moment of madness in an over-secure world'. But mental preparation and 'setting up' are also mentioned. Mental preparation could involve many things, but would need to include both the anticipation
and overcoming of fear before the event, and strategies of how to deal with fear in action, how to stop it making the body perform badly, for example, by ‘relaxing like you’ve never relaxed before’. We see some of the ‘setting up’: the use of a team of ‘spotters’ who will try to prevent or minimise injury by directing a falling climber away from jagged rocks at the foot of the climbs, and the padding of hazardous boulders and edges with mattresses and crash mats. Of course, many of these safety procedures become merely hopeful gestures once the climber is high on the route.

What we do not see or hear much about in the film is the systematic, sometimes obsessive training, dieting, and flexibility regimes in which almost all of these top climbers engage: the use of indoor climbing and bouldering walls, campus boarding, weights, the rigorous control of calories, backed up by both ‘scientific’ training ideas (emanating from athletics and gymnastics) and more ‘spiritual’ or ‘alternative’ beliefs about the body and its performance, for example, yoga, tai chi, martial arts, and so on. The climbers in *Hard Grit* train and prepare themselves like all top athletes, yet what is largely absent or understated in the film is this bodily *techne*; the knowledge, the working out, the mental and physical know-how that make possible these extreme performances. This is certainly not because the hard-core climbing audience are unaware of this dimension, nor is it because such things necessarily lack drama and are therefore ‘boring’. Rather, it is because *Hard Grit* seeks to highlight *thumos*, a key value for climbing chronically in tension with its technical dimension. If not quite a critique of the undue influence of *techne*, *Hard Grit*’s silence on the issue and its dramatic foregrounding of risk and real danger testify to the tension between these different aspects of the activity.

III

When I say that this rock is unclimbable, it is certain that this attribute...can be conferred on it only by the project of climbing it, and by a human presence. It is, therefore, freedom which brings into being obstacles to freedom, so that the latter can be set over against it as its bounds.
(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: p. 439)

The best-known discussion of *thumos* by Plato is to be found in the *Republic*, in the context of a passage on three different aspects of the human soul or psyche: reason, a faculty that calculates and decides; desire or appetite; and finally spirit, meaning by this mettle, guts, assertiveness, pugnacity or ambition. Plato believes that the guardians of his republic – a kind philosophical military police – need a certain ferocity of spirit, but must deploy it against enemies, not fellow citizens, and this requires that reason should rule both desire and spirit. As Plato puts it in the *Republic* (441e), spirit should be an ‘auxiliary’ of reason, that is, ruled by *dianoia* or discursive intelligence. Plato does not, of course, identify the most important form of reason with *techne*. Reason at this level is philosophical wisdom, a mental grasp of the fundamental and abiding nature of things, not mere technical know-how or the kind of knowledge bound-up in craft or professional skills.

In the modern period it would be unusual to think of reason as capable of shaping the whole of life on the basis of a comprehensive mental grasp of the natural and normative order of things. Reason is rather a formal or technical capacity, albeit one split into different areas and competencies: scientific reasoning is not identical
with moral or artistic reasoning; abstract reasoning differs from practical reasoning; and so on. Diversified, limited to particular spheres of application, and unable to discern any overall, normatively compelling coherence to things, reason cannot rule in the classical sense.

In this context desire, imagination and spiritedness are thrust forward as distinctive human faculties, or, more radically, post-human forces, presenting outlooks and ways of living very different from calculative rationality. Hence, the important social and cultural fault line in modernity between formal or technical reason and various human passions. In the modern period *thumos* is a mode of embodied desire or passion, and the tension between *techne* and *thumos* forms part of the tacit background of the drama that *Hard Grit* graphically displays.

Concern for the relationship between spiritedness or courage and reason outcrops elsewhere. It may be found, for example, in modern philosophy, with Nietzsche’s elevation of courage as the most important philosophical virtue (Nietzsche, 1973; Berkowitz, 1995: pp. 228–259) and in the importance Heidegger (1962) places on resolution (*Entschlossenheit*). There is insufficient space here to discuss these complex issues. However, returning in conclusion to an aspect of the questions raised above, we must now reflect briefly on the relationship between *thumos* and *techne* as it appears in climbing.

A chronic problem that climbing confronts, along with other adventure sports, is the tendency to become routine, normal, measured, predictable; a rationalised activity in which safety and success, and in general a largely commodified ‘adventure experience’, are virtually guaranteed by knowledge, preparation, training and equipment. To use Max Weber’s famous term, it tends to become one more mundane province of a ‘disenchanted’ world. For example, it would be easy to show the persistence of strains in climbing culture between a cherished anarchic, romantic individualism, pressures for administrative and educational rationalisation and commercial exploitation, and bodily and material *techne*. These have found expression in many places, but are particularly evident in the fascination of climbers with those who do not belong to the mainstream: charismatic yet difficult, abrasive characters, outsiders or trouble makers, a Pantheon that would include the likes of J. Menlove Edwards (Perrin, 1985), Dougal Haston (Connor, 2002), Don Whillans (Perrin, 2005) and, more recently, John Redhead and Johnny Dawes. The desire exhibited by climbing culture, and in particular by climbing’s preferred narrative history, for a succession of extraordinary feats like those recorded in *Hard Grit*, and for outsider figures in whose personal mythologies is expressed something of the authentic, rebellious spirit of the pursuit, reflect a larger recurrent need. This, then, is part of the resistance of climbing to the risk of conventionality, the hazards of prudence and responsibility.

A dialectic exists in climbing between more intensive, more effective, *techne* and the reassertion or renewal of risk, uncertainty, and the sublime folly of climbing at all. Here a certain affinity between *thumos*, technical competence and a kind of intoxication becomes visible. Writing in the magazine *Climber* (December 2004) of his 1960s gritstone apprenticeship in Chew Valley, Jim Perrin precisely captures this moment: ‘I saw people here, on the outcrops, with their ropes and their skill, and I wanted that mastery. On Wimberry Rocks... I led the *Sloping*
Crack and lost my sanity for decades’. Along with the power of climbing to unhinge its hard-core devotees go specific aspects of personality – drive, fervour, the need to ‘prove something’ to oneself, grit – all expressions of thumos. The commentary to Hard Grit suggests that the hard grit climber is at the mercy of his obsession, and that sometimes the desire to experience this kind of climbing ‘almost exceeds the desire to live through it’, thus amply illuminating a reassertion of this dimension as the authentic heart of the sport.

However, the issue here is the social significance of thumos as a form of embodied desire. In an early meaning of ‘obsessed’ the driven individual is seen as beset from without by an evil spirit, or in more modern terms by a fixed idea or impulse that ‘persistently assails or vexes’. As Giddens (1993) points out, the notion of an ‘external’ compulsion, or in contemporary ‘therapeutic’ terms an addiction, becomes particularly significant as social reflexivity, his version of rationalisation, spreads to almost all aspects of everyday social life. All social behaviour becomes potentially subject to a requirement for accountability; that is, those involved must be able to demonstrate how the behaviour is rational, organised, controlled and reflectively monitored, according to prevailing institutionally grounded assumptions, goals, requirements and reporting procedures.

In the case of climbing, external social pressures for safety, predictability and uniformity, as well as for the commodified or standardised accessibility of the ‘climbing experience’, and the inner dynamics of advances in technique and equipment, make episodes of intentional, socially significant extreme risk-taking – ‘transgression’ of a specific kind – ever more necessary. Here, then, transgression is a social phenomenon precisely because its precedents and context make it intelligible, and even necessary, within the historical and cultural traditions of the sport. This is another instance of the fundamentally dependent character of transgression, its reliance on the continuing viability of the normative and orienting capacities of historical tradition and everyday life. As such it stands opposed to misleading post-modernist hyperbole that celebrates the notion of a desire that has floated free of its anchorage in socially embedded norms and values, itself the mirror image of the quintessentially modern ideal of disembedded or disengaged reason (Taylor, 1989: pp. 143–176).

Finally, does the dynamic tension between techne and thumos define climbing? The idea of a climber or of climbing as an activity entirely reduced to the play of techne and thumos is that of a monstrosity in which there would be nothing to offset the way in which the body would become a perfected technical instrument (stronger, more flexible and dynamic, increasingly defined and guided by information), driven by obsession. I am not suggesting that this is an important concrete problem at the moment, although there have been famous historical episodes in which something of the sort does seem to have happened. The most famous case is the quasi-Nietzschean, National Socialist ideology that influenced German assaults on the Eigerwand in the 1930s. In particular, I am not in any way implying that the climbers featured in Hard Grit or the film’s makers have succumbed to this kind of distorted outlook. The issue is essentially to do with implicit tensions and possibilities within climbing culture, in other words the meaning and significance of climbing for climbers and within the larger society. If, as I would maintain, climbing culture usually manages to avoid falling for damaging exaggerations of
aspects of itself, upon what everyday resources, beyond the play of *techne* and *thumos*, does it rely?

We might briefly consider two: first, the ethical framework of everyday climbing, that is, the kind of climbing pursued by most climbers, recreational and professional, most of the time. Here the norms of an imagined climbing ‘community’ that transcend its various sub-groups, cliques and friendship networks is clearly of great importance in setting limits for *techne* and *thumos*. This applies, for instance, to the widely-understood ‘rules’ governing the circumstances under which a proper ascent may be claimed, for example, not chipping or otherwise damaging the rock so as to make a route easier or safer, and strict control of the use of bolts on certain kinds of rock and in specific locations, but it would also encompass the obligation of climbers to help others in difficulty. What is important is not, of course, that climbing’s ethical code is never broken, particularly by those forcing up standards, but rather the widespread belief that the community of climbers knows more or less what the norms and values are, and in the long run makes more or less balanced evaluations – of individual reputations, specific events and claims, and route quality – based upon them. Moral sources in this sense are features of climbing culture – and as an interested participant I would have to add ‘authentic’ climbing culture – that are familiar to most climbers and felt to be important to the identity and continuity of the sport, although as Durkheim points out, it is often a perceived threat that really illuminates and ignites the collective energy stored in the sacred.

This suggests that popular awareness of climbing’s history and of the values that it reflects and transmits is important. Significant contributions to communicating, shaping and modifying this aspect of climbing culture are made by both the historical sections and first ascent lists to be found in most British guidebooks and by specialist magazines and club journals, but also the stock of stories, yarns, and anecdotes that form a kind of lay counterpoint to more ‘official’ accounts. The recent popularity of commercial guides that omit historical information perhaps presages something of an impoverishment.

A second resource is to be found in approaches to climbing that emphasise things other than its broadly technical aspects or compulsive risk-taking rooted in aspects of personality. Here one might think of approaches that do not view factors like strength and power or scientific training regimes and knowledge as decisive to climbing performance, emphasising instead movement, balance, the ‘feel’ of rock, or the interplay between the human context – how the climber feels, the chemistry between climbing partners, and so forth – and the natural environment, for example, one’s sense of what, on that particular occasion, the rock in its world and in its own way might offer. In this more ‘phenomenological’ approach, climbing is not so much a battle with gravity and rock, an inert but hostile material, or a compulsive struggle against timidity, the instinct for self-preservation or inadequate physical resources, but rather a specific way in which aspects of nature, human and non-human, show themselves. The sight, feel and smell of rock revealed by the experience of climbing become more like ends in themselves, not simply sources of information to be exploited by the successful performer. Paradoxically then, as the passage above from Merleau-Ponty suggests, unclimbable rock might also be seen as an index of human freedom understood in the context of embodied
passion. Of course ‘freedom’ becomes highly problematic; that is, indistinguishable from compulsion, if passion is simply physiological, another expression of ‘blind’ bodily forces.

All this suggests that, in addition to technical competence and safety, climbing education and induction should give some importance to the experience of movement on rock as enjoyable and significant in its own right, rather than as a problem or project requiring enhanced bodily expertise and complex techniques of risk reduction. However, enjoyment of movement on rock, or a feeling of closeness to nature, or a sense of the immanent limits to embodied freedom, are quite distinct from the states of mind necessary for undertaking extreme risk. Transgressive episodes of extreme risk-taking define the limits of the sport at certain key moments in its history, and in this sense have a clear cultural significance. Certainly those involved risk death or serious injury, but more importantly from the point of view of the sport itself such episodes represent efforts to get as close as possible to unassimilable contingency, to danger rather than risk. They are not only ‘edge-work’, an approach to an outer limit, but also express an essential, fundamentally unruly aspect of climbing’s inner dynamic.

To conclude, this paper has sought to explore tensions within climbing between different, sometimes conflicting, impulses, which in the culture of climbing appear as opposed principles and spheres of value. As processes of rationalisation, or more particularly social reflexivity spread and intensify, new pressures are exerted on previously sequestered minority pursuits like climbing. On the one side are the largely ‘external’ forces of commodification and commercialisation as climbing and other outdoor activities are identified and exploited for their market potential, as well as demands for more standardisation and regulation springing from such things as educational uses and insurance requirements. On the other side are ‘internal’ pressures for intensified, systematic and effective techne, in equipment design, training methods and general know-how. This is the context that makes periodic reassertions of thumos ever more indispensable, and by foregrounding self-imposed, life-threatening danger and the obsession and ‘bottle’ it calls for, Hard Grit illuminates this dramatic oscillation.

We view the climbing sequences in Hard Grit with apprehensive fascination, but this is only partly to do with the actual risks incurred by the climbers. It is also due to the deeper and darker spectacle of techne and thumos intensified to the point of transgression, of elements or aspects of climbing that here seem in danger of losing their place among other qualifying and limiting dimensions, other sides of climbing that routinely keep them in check. These are beautiful climbs ascended with power, grace and courage, yet the monstrous dimension of climbing also seems close, in the forms of mania, compulsion, and perhaps ultimately a lack of care for the human and natural worlds within which climbing takes place (see Coffey, 2000). I have suggested that a ‘phenomenological’ approach to the experience of climbing, perhaps a refinement of the sheer pleasure of competent movement on rock, plus confidence in the present and future capacity of the wider climbing community properly to judge claims and achievements, together constitute moral sources capable of offsetting or restraining, but certainly not eliminating, the necessary madness of climbing.
Notes

1. Donnelly distinguishes between ‘difficulty’, which is often addressed through *techne*, and ‘risk’, which calls upon qualities of character or personality traits.

2. See also Al Alvarez’ account (pp. 152–130) of ‘feeding the rat’, which, for his subject, Mo Anthoine, is to do with the capacity of dangerous situations to help the climber discover whether his or her self-image has any basis in reality. The worry that it hasn’t is the hunger of the rat that climbing feeds.

3. David Dorian (in Rinehart & Sydnor, 2003) gives a splendidly witty and clever account of indoor competition climbing from an insider’s point of view, in which he observes that ‘As a spectacle, the sport puts you to sleep’.

4. In sport (or bolt) climbing, which is widespread in Europe, protection is provided by very strong, pre-placed expansion bolts (or steel staples set in resin). Located at regular intervals, and with the leader’s rope clipped to them by karabiners, bolts can make safe otherwise unprotectable rock. They are also more reliable in the event of a fall than much hand-placed protection. Note that the action of climbing the rock is fundamentally the same in both adventure and sport variants, the climber using the naturally occurring features of the rock surface to progress, and not pulling on gear, bolt or rope. Strictly, any such recourse would invalidate a claim to have actually climbed a particular route.

5. In order to grasp the significance of these episodes one needs to understand climbing grades and what a ‘headpoint’ is. The British climbing grades system is something of an art form in its own right, confusing to non-climbers. All recorded climbs are given a description and assigned a grade. The grades are currently as follows: easy, moderate, difficult, very difficult, severe, hard severe, very severe, and hard very severe. After hard very severe the extreme grades start. This is an open-ended numerical system, from 1 to the current top grade of 10. ‘Headpoint’ refers to the style of ascent. If the climber turns up at a crag without previous knowledge of a chosen route (beyond what’s in a guidebook) and climbs from bottom to top without illegitimate tactics, like previous abseil inspection, top-rope practice or resting on gear, an ‘on-sight flash’ may be claimed. At the highest grades (above E6, say) these are quite rare and highly respected events. Much more common is a process of inspection, top-rope practice, discussion with those who have already climbed the route, even pre-placing gear, until the climber feels sufficiently confident to try leading. If he or she succeeds, a ‘headpoint ascent’ can be claimed. A headpoint success may be regarded as important and creditable because on the hardest routes, even with so much preparation, success is certainly not guaranteed, and in a phrase from the film’s publicity material ‘failure never hurt anyone, until now’.

6. These include: *Gaia* E8 and *Meshuga* E9 (Black Rocks, Cromford), *Parthian Shot* E9 and *Braille Trail* E7 (Burbage), *End of the Affair* E8 (Curbar), and *New Statesman* E8 (Ilkley). The most important first ascent in *Hard Grit* is Seb Greave’s *Meshuga*, but some of the second ascents would be regarded by climbers as very significant, for example, Greave’s of *Parthian Shot* and Neil Bentley’s of *New Statesman*.

7. Grit, ‘god’s own rock’, is probably more saturated in history than any other climbable rock type in Britain. Not only do official guidebooks include long, detailed, carefully researched historical sections, but also knowledge of this historical legacy is widespread among regular climbers of grit.

8. Leading climbing magazines in Britain, the USA, and Europe usually have a regular expert column on training. However, awareness of the danger of excessive concentration on bodily *techne* is not foreign to climbing culture. For example, in the 1990s *The Thing*, a Sheffield-based climbing ‘fanzine’, included a cartoon strip by Paul Evans and Simon Norris. The antics and deformed features and body of its eponymous anti-hero, Boring Marvin, his brain surgically reduced by 99% ‘in order to improve his power to weight ratio’, nicely sent up the contemporary training obsessed bouldering and climbing scene. Boring Marvin is, of course, a climbing monster.

9. For Charles Taylor, reason in this classical sense, which exercised a powerful influence on Western thought up until the advent of modernity, ‘can be understood as the perception of the natural or right order, and to be ruled by reason is to be ruled by a vision of this order’ (Taylor, 1989: p. 121).

10. The theme is introduced by Descartes (1911) in *The Passions of the Soul*. More recently it has been developed and explored in different ways by the Romantics, surrealists, the Frankfurt School, and much of recent French theory and philosophy.

11. On the threat to sport offered by sophisticated commodification, and in particular the ways in which global marketing can exploit notions of ‘authenticity’ and supposedly ‘alternative’ values, see Goldman and Papson (1998). Kiewa (2002) discusses the paradoxical efforts of a group of Australian climbers to resist various unwelcome encroachments, some broadly expressions of rationalisation, from the outside world. However, the climbers in *Hard Grit* and the Sheffield-based community to which they belong are not Kiewa’s embattled
traditionalists. Most of them have engaged seriously in sport climbing at one time or another, and none of the recorded climbs are 'pure' on-sight ascents.

12. See http://www.fachwen.org/johnredhead and http://www.johnnydawes.com, respectively. A female version of this mythology is not so evident, in part perhaps due to historically lower participation rates. Nevertheless, an international list might include the likes of Catherine Desteville, Alison Hargreaves, and Lynne Hill.


14. While a root meaning of ‘monstrous’ is of something that deviates from the given order of nature, particularly the living unification of things that should be separate and distinct (man and bull, woman and lion), it also encompasses notions of the loss of right proportion, of things grown out of scale. Here I want to extend it to cover situations when what is perhaps a necessary facet of an activity, qualified or held in check by others, comes to dominate and distort the whole.

15. In his 2001 interview Richard Heap speaks of a decision not to make a follow-up to Hard Grit. Dawning awareness of the horrible possibility of inadvertently producing a climbing ‘snuff movie’, and one quite possibly involving the death or injury of friends, clearly and rightly outweighed any consideration of financial gain. Hard Grit was made initially without any real expectation of commercial success. His remarks communicate strongly genuine relief that no one in the film came to grief, and a feeling that they were very lucky to get away with it.

16. It is worth recalling the historical and contemporary importance of voluntary organisations to UK climbing: the British Mountaineering Council, clubs like the Fell and Rock, the Climbers’ Club and the Scottish Mountaineering Club which produce guidebooks, but also the strong tradition of voluntary rescue teams. On the character of climbing ethics see Tejada-Flores’ classic essay ‘The games climbers play’ (2000).

17. In the UK a popular range of ROCKFAX guides largely omits historical detail. ROCKFAX has also been accused of ‘cherry picking’ and of undermining the essential archive work, aiming at completeness and historical accuracy, of traditional, largely voluntary club-based guides.

18. Neil Lewis (2000) has interesting things to say about the body, and particularly the hands, of the climber. In a more recent essay (2004) he seeks to develop a defence of adventure climbing through an interpretation of the later Heidegger. However, his binary opposition between modernity and its expression in sport climbing (disembodied, inauthentic) and a critique of modernity inherent in adventure climbing (embodied, authentic) seems to me too stark. In both Heywood (1994) and here I begin from the position that climbing is deeply implicated in modernity; hence any affirmative identification of climbing’s core values must also confront uncertainty and ambivalence, in a way that parallels adventure climbing itself when it really is adventurous.

References


