

'Shit Happens': The Selling of Risk in Extreme Sport

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This article details the particular commodification of those high-risk, high-adrenalin activities known collectively as 'extreme sports'. A variety of commercial operators now offer relative sporting neophytes the chance to take part in mountaineering, snow boarding or canyoning adventures that are billed as being 'high thrill, low risk'. It is the way in which the risk and danger involved in these activities is discursively managed that is of particular interest for this article. The argument developed is that in selling extremity through a range of primarily tourist-oriented commercial avenues, the very real prospect of death and injury has been stripped from the activity itself. To elaborate this position, this article draws on several sporting disasters, including the much publicised, ill-fated ascent of Mount Everest in 1996, and the Interlaken canyoning disaster of 1999, as well as the burgeoning literary and media genre—the made-for-Hollywood 'adventure saga'.

Historically, climbing mountains, climbing rocks, and so on were done by a small number of people—traditionalists; people who would dedicate a considerable amount of time and passion for their sport. These people still exist but a new breed has emerged who flock to recreational sights in great numbers and have very little skills. These people learn in artificial environments like climbing gyms. They think if they can climb in the artificial gyms, they can climb anywhere. (Paul Smith, 2000: personal communication)

Introduction

Since the mid-1970s, a range of leisure activities has grown exponentially in popularity in most Western societies (Midol 1993). Sports such as rock climbing, mountaineering, canyoning, bungee jumping and snow boarding, to name but a few, now occupy key places amongst the leisure pursuits of the young, or the young at heart. In addition to their relative newness or their novelty value, the defining characteristic of these sports is that they provide their practitioners with a substantial chance of injury or even death. Undertaken at great height or at great speed, these high-risk sports are not for the faint-hearted. Indeed, contemporary sport now includes a wide circle of athletes who actively seek out risk and danger, and it is the concern of this article to examine some of the

narrative shifts that have accompanied the cultural construction of risk-taking within a sporting context.

Specifically, this article is concerned to explore the ways in which the notions of 'risk' and 'danger' have been all but erased from the commercial packaging of these kinds of sports. As part of the world-wide adventure holiday market, a variety of commercial operators now offer backpacking, sporting neophytes the chance to take part in mountaineering, canyoning and other adventures, and it is the particularly tragic consequences that arise from inexperienced non-athletes engaging in these high-risk, extreme activities that this article is concerned to elaborate here. Despite the relatively high levels of skill, athleticism and technical nous that are needed to master these 'frontier challenge activities', such pastimes are nonetheless constructed in very particular ways, so as to attract an amateur, tourist-based clientele, with little or no experience in the activity they are undertaking.

By drawing on two recent sporting tragedies that have occurred within the context of adventure travel—the ill-fated ascent of Mt Everest in 1996, in which eight 'executive adventurers' lost their lives, and the more recent canyoning disaster in Interlaken, Switzerland, in which 21 young tourists and their guides were killed—the argument pursued in this article is that, in the discursive presentation of these tourist-oriented versions of extreme sports, the very real prospect of injury and death has been stripped from the activity itself. The particular kind of selling of risk that the commercial proponents of adventure travel engage in has fundamentally altered people's perceptions of risk, trust and danger, and it is this shift in the subjective experiences of sporting practice that this article is also interested to detail.

To develop these points ethnographically, the article begins with an overview of the commercialisation of risk, before turning to the specific case studies of Interlaken and Mt Everest.

The commercialisation of risk

As is well documented in the sociological and anthropological literature (see, for example Beal 1995; Humphreys 1997; Rinehart 1998a, 1998b), extreme sports are attracting an ever-increasing body of participants. Ranging from weekend warriors who do no training, have little skill and are content to infrequently subject themselves to the waves, the single tracks and the *col* faces of the great outdoors, through to hard-core practitioners who are fully assimilated into the argot, fashion and technical skill of their preferred discipline, the extreme sports market is indeed a hotchpotch of interests and expertise.

In response to this growing market of extreme sportspeople, a burgeoning media industry has inevitably flourished. Given the centrality of specialised equipment and associated paraphernalia to adventure sports, it is not surprising that a sizeable media industry now promotes a tantalising range of state-of-the-art sporting exotica. Gloves, sunglasses, helmets, T-shirts, sandshoes, protective padding, bikes, karabiners and surf wax are all on sale for the discerning extreme buyer. Even so-called 'alternative' youth cannot escape the pivotal commercial involvement in their sport. Beal, writing about social resistance in the sub-culture of skateboarding, notes that there are 'those involved in corporate bureaucratic skating as 'rats'; individuals who brought the commercially produced paraphernalia and plastered all their belongings with corporate logos' (Beal 1995:255). Thus, the landscape of contemporary sport is now pockmarked by the increasing presence of a range of commercial images and interests, and an examination of

aspects of this media provides an ideal touchstone to some of the values and attitudes of those who engage in these frontier challenge activities.

Irrespective of whether one BASE (Building, Antennae, Span, Earth) jumps, mountain bikes or snowboards, the specialised media of each sport promotes it in language that reflects the risky nature of the activity. Even the names of the publications themselves reflect the discourse of extremity that they actively promote. To cite several examples, the leading British mountain climbing magazine is called *On the Edge*, the names of skateboarding magazines include *Thrasher* and *Slam*, surfers read *Carve and Rip Tide*, snow-skiing magazines go by the names of *Powder Hound* and *Ballistic*, while other forms of media incorporate the thrills, rush, excitement and exhilaration that is offered by these activities into their discursive presentation. An article in a mountain climbing magazine, for example, begins with a quote from Renton, of *Trainspotting* fame: 'take the best orgasm you've ever had, multiply it by a thousand, and you're still not even close' (*Climb Australia and New Zealand*, Autumn, 1997:48). In most media, these extreme sports are presented in almost cataclysmic terms. A recently released rock climbing video called 'Coming at Ya Hyper'—billed as 'hi-octane, in ya face entertainment'—employs technical styles and modes of production more common to a rock music video. Fast cuts, images coming in and out of focus and constant movement between locations, the footage of these lithe men and women dicing with death is unquestionably dramatic. Accompanied by a 'pumping' soundtrack, 'Coming at Ya Hyper' is a relentless introduction to the ways in which a very particular discourse of extremity is promoted and packaged for its own audience.

Indeed, the intensity of belonging to a culture of extremity is repeatedly amplified through the media. Trading on the notion that extreme athletes are amongst a sporting elite, advertisements for the Hydra Fuel range of sports drink, for example, claim 'we didn't make them for the masses. We didn't make them for the average jock. We didn't make them for athletes who settle for second best,' while those for Exceed sports nutrition products feature the slogan 'Don't tell me I can't,' suggesting that these are products for people for whom nothing is impossible. In other words, the discourse that surrounds these extreme sports plays with the notion that they offer more than sports as they are customarily imagined; extreme sports take their adherents faster, higher and further than all others.

What is important to note about this discourse of extremity however, is that it now enjoys a wide social circulation. No longer simply an index of attitudes and values internal to particular sporting subcultures, the non-specialised media have recognised the rise in popularity of these sports, and employ many of the insider themes to sell their products and paraphernalia (see Lanagan's paper, pp.283-91). Here, the 'risk society' is media rich and commodity replete. Previously 'on the edge' behaviour now features in a whole range of media to sell a whole range of mainstream commodities such as sunglasses, soft drinks, watches, alcoholic beverages and clothing. On Australian television, for example, a recent spate of commercials for Bacardi Rum incorporated the iconography of risk taking into its fairly ubiquitous publicity. With the backing sound track belting out 'My Generation', various shots in the commercial featured helmet-less business men fearlessly riding scooters, crowd surfing in night clubs, and engaging in reckless sexual behaviour. Although not exactly 'sport,' such scenes nonetheless promote an image in which dangerous behaviour has a high cool factor. Here, risk taking goes mainstream; sport and commoditisation no longer remain separate entities (Rinehart 1998a:2).

It is this conceptual collapse between risk and mainstream that is of crucial concern for this article, in that it creates the impression that anyone can take part in all manner of high-risk, high-adrenalin activities. The fact that inexperienced actors can leap from a plane or bungee jump creates the illusion that no expertise is needed to engage in extreme sports. In other words, these made-for-media versions of extreme sports are short-lived imitations of risk, rather than serious sporting initiations into activities in which physical fitness and technical nous are of paramount importance. This mediated normalisation of risk-taking is particularly problematic, in that it gives the impression that nothing goes wrong in extreme sports. In the popular packaging of these 'panic sports' (Kroker, Kroker and Cook 1989), these activities are presented as being entirely without risk or danger.

A closer examination of several of the more recent disasters in extreme sports however, reveals that this is not the case at all. The selling of risk is a careful exercise in discursive manipulation, in the erasure of death and danger, and the following section examines the particularly tragic consequences that have accompanied this selling of risk as it is played out in the adventure tourism market.

Selling adventure

The domain of adventure travel is an extraordinary phenomenon indeed. Steering away from traditionally 'safe' destinations such as the capital cities of Western Europe, a new breed of travellers gravitate instead to 'adventure tourism centres,' places like the Himalayas, the south island of New Zealand, or to Switzerland, in areas around Interlaken, the self-proclaimed 'adventure capital of the world.' In such locations, predominantly young tourists pay commercial operators—with names like 'High n' Wild Mountain Adventures' or 'Extreme River Canyonning Adventures'—large sums of money to experience activities such as single-track mountain biking, para-gliding, bungee jumping, white-water rafting and, of course, canyonning, a peculiar activity that mixes abseiling, hiking and white-water river running. Indeed, local industry in these wilderness areas has discovered that tourists are a lucrative source of income. As the Australian journalist Andrew Bain, writing in relation to the prevalence of these kinds of activities in New Zealand, points out 'adventure is a poker game of spiralling stakes. Create an adventure and there is an immediate scramble to up the ante' (cited in *The Age*, 2000:11).

The most problematic application of 'adventure tourism,' however, is illustrated in the package tour market, through operators such as Contiki Travel. Each year, Contiki takes busloads of 18 to 35 year olds on the 'adventure of a lifetime.' In addition to the usual array of museums, galleries and scenic wonders visited by more conventional tourists, Contiki also offers its young travellers a series of packages described in their promotional literature as being 'adventure options.' Here, adventure seekers are dropped by the busload into natural environments of varying degrees of ruggedness and isolation. Instead of approaching nature with respect and knowledge, the forests, rocks, caves, canyons and rivers of these wilderness areas become the backdrop for high adrenalin, high-testosterone exploits. White water rafting in Austria or paragliding in the Greek Islands are included in these adventure options, while in Switzerland, the options include a 200 metre bungee jump from a cable car, or, as will be discussed shortly, a hair-raising ride down a river canyon. The contemporary travel experience is thus peppered with sites or locations at which the captive market of adventure travellers can live 'on the edge,' seemingly without ever meeting with misfortune. More importantly, in this packaging of adventure, sport and thrill

are condensed into a delimited time frame—the 'adventure of a lifetime' takes just 21 days.

Of critical concern for this article however, it is within this domain of adventure travel where we find an extraordinary range of sporting novices taking part in activities that depend upon a marked degree of technical and sporting competence. Sports such as canyoning or white-water rafting require a keen understanding of weather patterns, river currents, and so forth, while activities such as mountaineering or rock climbing require a certain level of technical skill to perform them safely, as well as an awareness of local weather conditions. Despite their dependence on technical expertise, local weather knowledge, and substantial levels of strength and fitness, it is exactly these kinds of sports that an increasing number of backpackers, with little or no experience, are adding to their travel itinerary. While Contiki sells their adventure options as part of an overall package tour, even independent travellers are incorporating what are unequivocally high-risk activities into their travel plans. On safari in Africa—climb Mt Kilimanjaro or take in a spot of micro lighting. In Nepal, grab a Sherpa and hike through the Himalayas, or in New Zealand, take an 'adrenalin filled jet boat ride' on Lake Wakatipu. Within the backpacking scene, in other words, we find a dangerous number of thrill seekers whose appetite for adventure often exceeds their skills and competence.

Despite, or because of the relative inexperience of the tourists taking part in these kinds of activities, the commercial operators of mountaineering, canyoning and other expeditions routinely package the adventure sports on offer as being entirely without risk. Indeed, publicity brochures and other pamphlets which accompany the adventure holiday market work hard to reassure the safety of the sporting novice. Publicity for AJ Hackett Bungy—a company operating out of Queenstown in New Zealand—beckons, somewhat rhetorically, with the slogan 'Safe? We invented safe.' Adventure Sports—a UK based adventure travel company—offers holidays for the 'adult market' that are 'fun and safe. No previous experience is necessary, and singles and groups are welcome', while the promotional literature for Adventure World—the company at the centre of the Interlaken canyoning tragedy—claimed that, since 1993, it has led more than 36,000 canyoneers, with no mishap more serious than a broken leg. This selling of extremity at the expense of risk however, is best captured in the comments of one backpacker, recently returned from her tour of Europe, when she claims that: 'you go to a resort area, and you see ads for parapenting [parachuting from mountain peaks] and ice climbing with chicks wearing sports bras. It's advertised like an amusement park.' As such comments make clear, it is through such representations, generated from within the adventure travel industry itself, that these extreme experiences are actively and aggressively sold to a novice market of travellers as being 'high thrill, low risk' adventures.

In spite of the rhetoric that suggests these activities are sports without hazards or danger, things can and do go wrong. In 1996, a British tourist was killed when he was sucked into a whirlpool on a French canyoning adventure. In 1997, five skydivers on a tourist flight from Auckland jumped from a plane, hoping to free-fall to Antarctica. Three of the five plummeted at more than 200 km/h into the packed ice, their chutes failing to open. In the same year, eleven hikers also died during a canyoning adventure in Arizona. In 1999, a jet-boat accident near Queenstown in New Zealand killed one Japanese tourist, while in June 2000, two abseilers were killed in the Blue Mountains, and a British tourist on a canyoning trip near Katoomba was also killed, when her body was dragged underwater.

Given such statistics, the fact that relative novices are enticed to take part in sports that are obviously risky, death-defying and down right dangerous remains of central concern to this article. With this in mind, it now gives attention to two case studies: the ill-fated ascent of Mt Everest in 1996, and the more recent Interlaken canyoning disaster, which took place in 1999.

Interlaken 1999

The picturesque Swiss village of Interlaken is a regular stop on the Contiki travel circuit, and in August 1999, 45 young backpackers set off on a 'canyoning adventure of a lifetime.' With varying degrees of outdoor experience and, according to various reports, no special instruction from Adventure World—the operator in whose hands these young lives were placed—the tourists paid the equivalent of \$75 for a ninety-minute excursion through the white water of the Saxtenbach Gorge. As the weather closed in, and the gorge filled with water, eighteen of the tourists and three of the eight guides were swept to their death by a flash flood.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, however, a host of objective or commonsensical reasons emerged which would have more than suggested that to participate in this particular canyoning trip would have been certainly tempting fate. Indeed, it is when reconstructing the various hazards encountered by these tourists that the contradictions inherent within the discursive presentation of such activities become maximally apparent.

Given the intense media coverage that this incident attracted, reconstructing the unfolding events in the Saxtenbach Gorge is a relatively straightforward exercise. Like most other extreme disasters, a large part of the Interlaken tragedy can be attributed to the topography of the region, as well as to sudden changes in the weather. The Saxtenbach Gorge is steep and narrow, and any flash storm would have been—and was—a disaster. On the day of the accident, rain had set in, yet according to media and eyewitness accounts, Adventure World still led its 45 clients into the narrow gorge. The sheer cliffs of the gorge meant that scrambling to safety should the river suddenly surge was not an option. From the bottom of the canyon, participants had a limited view of the weather conditions overhead, or of any activity in the river upstream.

Further to these precarious weather patterns, the technical competence of the travellers involved was, again, according to eyewitness accounts, not checked, yet canyoning is an activity that demands a pronounced degree of technical skill. Simply entering a gorge requires that canyoneers 'drop in' by abseiling towards the river below. For the frightened or the inexperienced, inching your way down a steep cliff is painstaking at the best of times. In wet weather however, such as that encountered around Interlaken in August 1999, the presence of rain on the rocks makes an easy abseil both laborious and treacherous; well beyond the competence of the average Contiki tourist. Once in the canyon, participants then need to be able to surf the currents of the river, negotiating the rocks and rapids on their back, often at great speed. A simple life jacket provides buoyancy, and a wet suit protects against the chill of an alpine river, however the actual technical manoeuvres required to descend through the gorge are once more surely beyond the competence of the average tourist. To quote one Adelaide backpacker, who took the canyoning option on an earlier Contiki tour of Europe:

You go completely underwater many times. At other times you go headfirst over waterfalls. Just about everybody came out with bumps and bruises. There's a

place called 'the washing machine'—you get pushed under a waterfall, and it drives you round and round in circles.

Not surprisingly, canyoning is described by habitués of the sport as being 'white water rafting without the raft.'

Given this presentation of events, it seems surprising that an inexperienced, untrained backpacker would embark on this sort of adventure, in which skill, knowledge and competency are of paramount importance. But, to return once more to the issue of discursive presentation, such activities are rarely described or detailed in a way that documents the very real risks and dangers involved. According to the father of a young Australian student killed at Interlaken, his daughter would have never gone canyoning, if she had known the risks. Yet the risks are undeniable, and in light of the hazards and dangers presented above, it remains curious that young backpackers continue to risk their lives in these kinds of ways. Given the precarious balance between a successful trip and an unmitigated tragedy, it seems naïve that people externalise risk in the belief that 'it will never happen to me.'

It is here that the work of Douglas (1966, 1985, 1992) and Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) on the cultural selection of danger is particularly instructive. Arguing that people who adhere to similar forms of social organisation take or avoid similar risks (Douglas 1992), in the case of the predominantly middle-class backpackers, visiting from predominantly Western countries, we see a certain similarity in social organisation and expression. More than this, Douglas argues that the exercise of power is also crucial to risk taking and risk avoidance. 'A cultural theory of risk perception would be trivial if it shirked considering the distribution of power in relation to the pattern of risk' (1966:8).

Indeed, the externalisation of risk is made possible precisely through the kind of discursive management and manipulation undertaken by commercial operators such as Adventure World. Given that they have little experience in the activity they are undertaking, travellers are thus totally and utterly dependent on the guiding companies, who construct themselves as very particular kinds of experts. As the promotional literature for Adventure World beckons 'our veteran guides will ensure your safety, as you have the time of your life.' Here, the veteran tour operator is constructed as a wily, infallible professional, with years of experience under his belt. In related examples, the UK-based Adventure Sports company claims that 'our staff are talented athletes with a level of expertise that ensures you are in good hands', while Extreme River Canyoning Adventures, who also operate out of Switzerland, maintains that 'our activities are run by qualified and extremely experienced outdoor pursuit instructors, not business men.' Such personal affirmations however, cease to matter, when the people who take part in the activities are not athletes—and therein lies the problem. In the construction of these adventure sports experts, we find a blurring between expert athlete and sporting neophyte. On the one hand, the tour guides are presented as being very particular kinds of experts; fearless adventurers, capable of meeting any challenge, yet, on the other hand, the same discourse of extremity runs the line that anyone can do it.

The analytical point to emphasise from such accounts is two-fold. First, the construction of the adventure sports expert raises questions for the ways in which power is deployed, negotiated, expressed and transformed, as the neophyte and the expert confront one another within the context of adventure travel. In such scenarios, the differentials of power and knowledge shape even the most well-meaning encounter between traveller and commercial operator. Following on from this, in this particular presentation of expertise,

notions of trust, as well as of risk, have all but collapsed. As 'experts' the outfitters of these operations take care of all the details, to the point that the tourist just has to turn up on the day. Equipment is supplied, weather patterns are checked and the canyon is chosen—by the experts. In embarking on these high-risk adventures, therefore, the sporting novice has to take no responsibility for their limits or their abilities. Most importantly, in this particular presentation of expertise, there is no sense of 'the experts' having to earn trust, of having to prove their credentials. Their expertise is taken as a given. In every possible way, the knowledge and qualifications of the guides—embodied in dress and demeanour—is established in such a way that downplays the highly risky nature of the sports that they lead the tourists through. Thus, the conundrum as to why people would want to put their lives in the hands of people that they've never met is answered, when the activity is sold in such a way that the ever-present possibility of death and danger is rationalised away from the experience.

Nevertheless, such tragedies appear to have no learning curve, however macabre, in which future adventurers learn from the mistakes of the past. Less than two years before, a sporting tragedy of unparalleled proportions had unravelled on the high slopes of Mount Everest, surely suggesting caution for inexperienced athletes to be engaging in adventure sports.

Everest 1996

In many ways, the Everest disaster of 1996 bears certain similarities to the Interlaken tragedy just described. Like canyoning, high altitude mountaineering is an extremely risky business, with a remarkably high incidence of injury and death. Various figures are bandied about, with the ratio being somewhere between 1 in 5 to 1 in 10 deaths for every success. As Ortner notes 'the most frequent kind of death is sudden and shocking—a slip or a drop off a sheer face, or a fall into a crevice, the biggest killer in terms of numbers—burial in an avalanche, or a slow death from altitude sickness' (1999:6), where an inadequate supply of oxygen reaching the bloodstream produces strokes, cerebral and pulmonary oedema and other bodily breakdowns. Despite the extremely poor odds in this form of deep play, the pay-off comes in the production of a very particular kind of 'mountain experience', in which 'insights into important dimensions of life and experience' are generated (Ortner 1997:139). Certainly, risk is central to the aesthetic of high-altitude mountaineering, however there is some conflation here between difficulty and danger. And, as was the case with Interlaken, the subjective experience of the risk and dangers involved in climbing the world's most feared and famous mountain has been diluted, or stripped from the activity itself, through its construction and presentation in a range of commercial avenues.

However, while canyoning and mountaineering adventures are both sold in very particular ways, in the case of Everest, the 'extreme experience' is sold to a very different kind of tourist than the backpackers of Interlaken. Climbing Mt Everest is increasingly attracting a breed known as 'executive adventurers,' predominantly men with high-profile, white collar professions, who spend their weekends and holidays mountaineering. As the writer and mountaineer, Joe Simpson, points out:

... a Himalayan holiday, including an ascent of a couple of twenty thousand foot mountains is no longer a pipe dream, but one of the staples advertised in almost every trekking brochure you open. Everest is simply another holiday destination, just more expensive than the others. (1997: 61)

While their substantial amounts of disposable income enables these executive adventures to engage in challenges such as climbing Everest, it also creates its own set of tensions that were played out, with tragic consequences, on the high slopes of Everest in 1996. In May of that year, eight people lost their lives when bad weather set in, trapping them high above help. In a macabre twist, one of the expedition leaders—a New Zealand climber named Rob Hall—managed to patch a radio call through to his heavily pregnant wife, adding an element of pathos to an already very public drama.

To a far more marked degree than we saw in Interlaken, serious economic imperatives triggered the events that transpired in May of 1996. A lucrative industry had developed in the Kathmandu valley, with several guiding companies competing for the executive adventure market. With these weekend climbers paying in the order of US\$60-70,000 to climb Everest, competition was fierce between companies. On the day of the disaster, no fewer than five parties were attempting the climb, and given that future business is generated from every successful summit, there were strong pressures for these companies to get their clients to the top. Thus, the two companies at the centre of the tragedy—Adventure Consultants and Mountain Madness were locked into a rivalry to get their clients to the summit in conditions that, with more experienced, non-paying climbers, would have seen the party turn around. Once again, we see inexperienced athletes, whose appetite for adventure far exceeds their skills and competence. Several members of the Mountain Madness party had never climbed at high altitude, with one member, a New York socialite named Sandy Pittman, who was covering the climb for *Vogue*, taking gourmet food, as well as a TV and video player, so that she could watch movies in her tent—a fair indication that she was not entirely prepared for the exercise she was undertaking. More tellingly, such actions suggest that Pittman was not expecting the trip to be much more than an exotic camping adventure, rather than the serious test of technical skills and competence that it was.

More critically however, for the events that unfolded, in the rival Adventure Consultants camp, three clients were suffering fatigue, before they even embarked on the climb to the summit, and this had dangerous repercussions for the events that took place on the higher slopes. To climb Everest, mountaineers must work within a very tight and strictly enforced time frame. On Everest, safety effectively hinges on speed. If an ascent takes longer than expected, it increases the chance that climbers will run out of oxygen or be overtaken by darkness on their descent. On the day of the disaster, however, the three climbers with Adventure Consultants, addled by fatigue and altitude sickness, slowed the rate at which the entire party could climb, yet the ascent went ahead regardless, killing eight climbers in the process.

The fact that these executive adventurers had paid a serious amount of money to successfully climb Everest created a series of tensions between the experienced guides, the local Sherpas and the Western climbers being pack-hauled to the top. Whereas the Interlaken tragedy can be attributed to a collapse in perceptions of risk and trust, the Everest disaster pivoted around money, and the rights that paying extraordinary large sums of money can supposedly 'buy' an executive adventurer. Economic imperatives, in other words created an expectation of completion. Despite their physical limitations, lack of climbing experience, and the very real dangers posed by the inclement weather, the fact that these weekend mountaineers had paid extraordinary sums of money seemingly bought them the right to risk not only their own lives, but those of their Western and Sherpa guides too.

The commercialisation of Everest is well documented by a range of sources, who all agree that the selfless ethics that once characterised mountaineering have been eroded or displaced by the kind of corporate colonisation of Everest described here. On the anthropological front, Sherry Ortner (1997, 1999) has recently detailed the changing relationships between Sherpa guides and their Western clients, based on more than thirty years of fieldwork in the Kathmandu valley. In other genres, writers such as Joe Simpson (1997) or Jon Krakauer (1997) describe a situation in which a fixed rope—virtually a handrail—has been installed along the climb, allowing these executive adventurers to ‘bag the big one.’ In Simpson’s book, *Dark Shadows Falling*, he reports one instance in which as many as 40 people—many of them weekend climbers—reached the summit in a single day. In *Into Thin Air*, the American journalist, Jon Krakauer, recounts the comments of one executive adventurer who was on the fateful trip, who insisted that the climb for which he had paid for proceed, despite the increasingly inclement weather. As Krakauer reports, the final comments of a now dead American executive, who mortgaged his house to the hilt to make the ascent, were that: ‘experience is over-rated. I’m telling you. They’ve built a yellow brick road to the summit’. As such accounts make clear, money mediates or mitigates risk, in doing so producing a dubious kind of expert: if you have sufficient money, then that qualification is enough to get you to the top of Everest.

Made-for-Hollywood disasters

In many ways, the class composition of extreme sportspeople has produced a curious and questionable commercial by-product—the ‘adventure saga’. Most adherents of extreme sports, but particularly mountaineering, tend to be relatively highly educated and articulate, and they tend to write large numbers of articles, books, and personal memoirs, usually to fund their next adventure. As Ortner points out:

... in the quite voluminous first hand mountaineering literature, mountaineers often discourse on the kinds of meanings and insight they derive from the sport: about the moral fibre of the inner self, about the nature of bonding and friendship, about the peace and calm of high cold places against the noise and bustle of modern society. (1997:139)

What this means is that because the kinds of disasters discussed in this article tend to involve middle to upper class Western travellers, with a sizeable amount of media and cultural capital, this has seen various sporting and related tragedies become the subject matter for this burgeoning literary and media genre. Since the mid-1990s, when Sebastian Junger published *A Perfect Storm*, his tale of a fishing boat lost at sea, a range of autobiographical accounts, as penned by a survivor, have found their ways onto bookshelves and news-stands around the world. From Jon Krakauer’s instant classic, *Into Thin Air*, to *Sheer Will*—Mike Groom’s tale of losing one third of each foot in a climbing accident in New Zealand—the crags of towering mountains and the troughs of twenty metre waves, have produced tragic tales of frostbite, shipwreck and adventures gone bad. Indeed, the 1998 Sydney to Hobart race, where six sailors died, has, to date, produced no fewer than four books. In other words, every great disaster, it seems, if marketed correctly, can be sold for profit.

Of course, every great tragedy, it also seems, results in a made-for-Hollywood movie. In recent years, we’ve seen *Everest*, which details the mountaineering disaster of 1996 and, in 2000, the cinematic version of *A Perfect Storm*, featuring American actors George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg, graced our screens, along with *Vertical Limits* and

Himalaya. What is important to note about these media texts is that they help to construct and embellish the discourse of extremity in very particular ways. They are an integral part of the selling of risk. As we see through these sorts of media products, such disasters, which involve 'Man' struggling against the elements, with varying degrees of success, have generated a certain kind of 'extreme action hero' who emerges battered and bruised from adversity. Such activities present a situation in which the individual can dramatically, if sometimes fatally, distinguish him or herself from the crowd.

The question that needs to be asked then is at what point does tragedy become professional entertainment, given that the distinction between ambulance chasing and an adventure saga is a fine one indeed? To be a successful account of a tragedy, someone *must* survive; the fact that some one made it back helps to construct the backpacker or the executive adventurer as a heroic class apart. As one author writes, 'if dying is done properly, erasure from the quick confers glory all round. On the dead for proving their will to climb, on the mountain for the new respect it demands, and on the survivors for their courage to continue in the face of disaster' (Barcott 1996:65). In such media constructions, the extreme athlete emerges as ever adventurous, and it is out of this construction that the discourse of extremity is principally constituted. In the commodification of disaster, we see risk becoming an adventure, becoming entertainment, and in becoming entertainment, the subjective experiences of those partaking in—and now consuming these events through literature and the media—has been radically shifted.

The morality of risk-taking

So what then is to be made of an extreme adventure when *no one* survives; when death emerges from the depths of deep play (Geertz 1973)? Such questions raise a number of issues concerning the morality of risk-taking, and it is this dimension of the extreme sports market that this article now explores through an examination of the gender politics that accompany risk-taking.

The discourse of extremity is unquestionably highly gendered, which makes it culturally unacceptable for women to dramatically, if fatally, distinguish themselves from the crowd. As the 1998 death of the Scottish climber, Alison Hargreaves, and the 1996 media pillorying of the aforementioned Sandy Pittman make clear, where women are involved in dangerous pursuits, all sorts of cultural definitions and limitations are placed upon their behaviour. In other words, there are quite clear cultural boundaries placed on being a hero. Whereas lone men barrelling down single tracks or tackling insurmountable cols fit comfortably within the category of the supremely brave and ever adventurous 'hero', women adventurers are perceived as being 'driven', or 'egocentric'; selfish qualities that are not only ill at ease with the cultural definition of hero, but also unbecoming for a lady to boot!

To cite the experiences of Sandy Pittman, who was criticised for leaving her wealthy husband and child to risk the Everest climb, Pittman writes that many of her Manhattan friends considered her ambitions misguided: 'Aren't you afraid that your husband will take up with someone else while you're away,' she reports they asked her. 'How can you be a good mother when you're gone for so long?' (cited in Rose and Douglas 1999:24). Equally, Alison Hargreaves fell foul of the morality of risk taking. Reaching the summit of Switzerland's Mount Eiger in 1988, Hargreaves created a stir when it was discovered that she was five months pregnant at the time. The British journalist—and now domestic goddess—Nigella Lawson described her as personifying 'me-first mountaineering';

Hargreaves' climbing was a neurosis that 'showed a reality-denying self-centeredness' (in Rose and Douglas 1999:24). 'I was pregnant, not sick,' Hargreaves countered. 'What kind of mother would I be if I sacrificed climbing for my children? It makes me, and is what makes me the good mother that I am' (cited in Rose and Douglas 1999:24). Here cultural constructions come full circle. Despite rallying against the media vilification of her maternal credibility, ultimately Hargreaves seeks to portray herself as a good mother, who would never jeopardise her children—what kind of mother would? Hargreaves went on to become, in 1995, the second person, male or female, to climb Mount Everest solo without using oxygen.

Three years later, she was killed descending from another successful summit of Mount Everest. It was here that we saw the morality of risk-taking go into overdrive. As a mother of two, Hargreaves had effectively abandoned her children by taking such extraordinary risks. The particular cultural definitions and limitations imposed upon Hargreaves ensured she would never dramatically, if fatally, distinguish herself from the crowd as a climber, but rather as an errant, unthinking mother. As a group of British women journalists noted, every news report about her accomplishments started with the words 'mother of two.' By contrast, when a male climber either summited or died in the attempt, the headlines never read 'father of one killed on Everest.' (cited in Rose & Douglas 1999:26). In May 2000, a South Australian climber, Mark Auricht, was killed, having turned back less than 1000 metres from the summit. In a whole sweep of media descriptions, Auricht was a man who 'died doing what he loved' or 'who embraced a challenge' (*The Advertiser*, 25 May 2000:1). He was a driven man who knew no limits; a man who could fatally distinguish himself from the crowd. forty-eight hours later no fewer than 90 climbers had conquered Everest, including the oldest climber, and the first blind climber, which brings into question the authenticity of the individual noble quest, when such accomplishments are now a dime a dozen.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this article I have been concerned to tease out some of the discursive complexities that have emerged from the increasing commercialisation—in a variety of forms—of extreme sport. In particular, I have been interested to explore some of the contradictions and consequences that emerge from relative novices engaging in high-risk, high-adrenalin activities by examining some of the ways in which commercial operators sell their services so as to make them attractive to relative, if not total, sporting novices. Importantly, the material presented here raises several analytical issues for the anthropology of sport, as well as for wider understandings of the notions of risk and danger.

To take the anthropology of sport first, given the kinds of activities described in this article, the nomenclature of 'sport' is problematic; in many ways, there is nothing 'sporting' about these tourist-oriented frontier challenge activities. The activities that backpackers and executive adventures enjoy as part of their adventure holiday experience are devoid of precisely the properties and qualities that attract 'real' athletes to these, and other more conventional sports. In the tourist-oriented versions of 'extreme sport', there is no dedication to training, there is no attention to diet, to bodily control or to personal restraint that one typically associates with sports such as athletics or cycling or swimming. To take part in these tourist-oriented versions of extreme sports, basically all one needs to

do is to show up. The selling of extremity, in other words, has brought fundamental changes to the social and symbolic dimensions of the activities themselves.

From a risk management point of view, the kinds of accounts presented here are also intriguing, in that the answer to the question as to why people feel the need to risk their lives like this still remains largely elusive. Indeed, the author has yet to penetrate the complexity as to *why* inexperienced backpackers or executive adventurers are prepared to put their lives in the hands of people that they've never met, when the risks are so patently apparent. As a traveller in France at the time of the Interlaken tragedy, I was struck by the number of fellow backpackers I encountered in camp grounds and youth hostels who, having heard of the tragedy, were still going to take part in some kind of extreme adventure before returning to Australia, New Zealand or the United States. The title for this article was inspired by an apposite comment from one backpacker, as explanation for her willingness to engage in these kinds of clearly dangerous activities: 'well, shit happens'.

Notes

1. Extreme sports are known elsewhere as 'whiz sports' First appearing in France in the early 1970s, whiz sports grew out of a conflict between the skiers and the coaches of the French Shi Federation. The clash revolved around two divergent notions of training. Some skiers spoke out against the work-oriented nature of training, and proposed more playful practices. As Midol and Broyer suggest, they 'promoted a concept of fun that should be experienced in the here and now' (1995: 206).
2. The almost stratospheric commercial success of the eXtreme Games provides perhaps the finest example of the way in which so called 'alternative' sports, which are meant to buck the system, are increasingly attracting big money and big sponsors (see Rinehart 1998a; 1998b). Although worthy of detailed consideration in themselves, the structural and symbolic content of the eXtreme Games are beyond the scope of this article.
3. While I borrow the term from Beck (1992), I am clearly using it to refer to a very different kind of risk society. Whereas Beck uses it to describe 'invisible' risks that are located in the environment or in over-industrialisation, there is a very visible, active dimension to risk taking in extreme sports, as opposed to the kind of involuntary risk acceptance that Beck describes.
4. By way of something of an ethnographic footnote, in May 2000, Adventure World suspended all activities in and around Interlaken, after another tourist was killed in a bungy jumping accident.
5. The professionals quite clearly have a different interpretation of the events. One professional climber retired after the accident, claiming that 'there is a certain amount of risk there, and I don't want to push it any further. I've used up my nine lives'.

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