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# **Mountain Film. An Analysis of the History and Characteristics of a Documentary Genre.**

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## **Abstract:**

The academic component of this thesis is a critical analysis of the documentary genre of mountain film. Following a broad evaluation of the place of genre within documentary, the thesis examines the history and characteristics of mountain film. I will argue that there is indeed a defined sub-genre of mountain film and that through critical analysis of films made within this genre it is possible to trace the emergence of techniques and modes of engagement peculiar to it.

The production of the creative component to the thesis, the film *In The Shadow of the Mountain*, was informed by this academic component. An understanding of the genre expectations of the audience and a deliberate use of the recognised techniques of mountain film influenced production choices. Similarly, the experience of producing a film within the genre provided a practical basis to the approach taken in the written thesis.

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## **Preface**

I would like to acknowledge the support of my supervisor Ross Johnston in the preparation of this thesis. I would also like to thank my fellow students at the Centre For Science Communication for all their help.

A big thanks to my family for being supportive and understanding while I shut myself away behind the computer.

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# Mountain Film. An Analysis of the History and Characteristics of a Documentary Genre.

## Introduction

From 1851-1857 Arnold Smith ran the most popular vaudeville show in London at Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. His subject? A dramatised re-enactment of his 1850 climb of Mt Blanc. The multi-media show was “an extravaganza of Alpine kitsch” (including St Bernards and chamoix!) and what it provided was an opportunity for the audience to experience risk vicariously. Thus, in “distinctly un-precipitous Piccadilly they could put themselves virtually in danger, could for an hour two be among the rocks and steep ice of Mt Blanc.” (Macfarlane 2003, pp 88-9). It is this appeal of the vicarious experience – with its roots in the Romantic imagination - that has continued into the age of film and is evidenced, I will argue, by the ongoing popularity of the documentary genre of mountain film.

Audiences have long been attracted to stories that focus on a protagonist's confrontation with risk, and visual media has a long history of documenting this confrontation (Walter 1984). Contemporary adventure film reflects this and continues with the basic structure of a documentary that portrays a central character (or characters) confronting risk and physical challenge. The audience is brought along on this journey.

This thesis examines filmmakers' treatment of risk through this genre of factual filmmaking. This genre I have called Mountain Film, it is also known as Adventure Documentary and Adventure Film. The thesis will seek to analyse the history and common characteristics within this genre of risk-based filmmaking. The key link between films is that within the documentary the activity or sport filmed carries a fatal consequence (Brymer 2005). The thesis will specifically reference documentaries made within this genre. The direct link will be made to my own experience in creating a documentary within this genre, the creative component of this thesis.

I use the terms adventure film and mountain film virtually synonymously on the following basis:

Historically much of the earlier film within the genre was on mountaineering. The principle distribution vehicle for these films is the over 70 'Mountain Film' festivals that occur each year around the world. Though the subject matter of the films ranges from ocean kayaking to long-distance swimming to walking, the activity follows a similar pattern involving quest, adventure and physical hardship. The subject matter thus shares very close characteristics and objectives to mountaineering expeditions.

As observed above, the principle distribution vehicle for these films is the 'Mountain Film' festival circuit. I will illustrate that this specific and unique distribution impacts on genre definition, audience pre-conceptions and issues of spectatorship. Though much of the mountain film audience is limited to the festival circuit there has been more widespread success and distribution for some documentaries, most notably *Touching the Void* (2003; dir Kevin Macdonald) which won the BAFTA for best film and had a wide scale theatrical release.

In Chapter One, by way of introduction, my aim is to clarify the concept of genre. I look at some of the broad concepts behind genre theory in film generally – particularly the relationship between history, audience and industry in establishing genre. I observe that very little critical attention has been paid to genre (or sub-genre) within documentary per se.

There has been observed a blurring of distinction between documentary and other film genres. I reference a broad survey of documentary theory in relation to recent changes in attitudes and definitions of what constitutes documentary particularly in lieu of the effects of the development of new technology and new sub-genres, eg docu-drama and reality factual programming (Austin, Hill et al). As distinctions between documentary and other genres have blurred so there is a challenge to clearly define sub-genres within the documentary pantheon.

I will differentiate between genre and the concept of 'documentary modes of representation' that has been the focus of much academic attention (Nichols et al). Re-evaluation is required of currently understood distinctions within the genre of documentary. The thesis will place the mountain film genre within the wider pantheon of documentary film and examines the genre's relationship to current critical theory.

Having observed the importance of a historical context for the establishment of genre Chapter Two of the thesis traces the history of mountain film from the earliest examples

in the early 1900s through to the present. This survey looks at key films and filmmakers and traces a lineage of commonality. We find key elements of the genre instilled in some of the earliest texts available and can trace these common elements through to contemporary film. The genre, I will argue is however far from static and I will trace some key developmental strands through the history of mountain film. We shall discover that some of the techniques and modes of engagement of contemporary documentary and other factual programming have their antecedents in the genre of mountain film.

Having placed mountain film within a historical context, the thesis will then analyse Mountain Film as a generic form of filmmaking. In Chapter Three I will examine the practical components that link documentary in the mountain film sub-genre. Aside from the self-evident subject matter of mountains and adventure there are common story and character elements that one can trace through much of the mountain film canon. Similarly I will argue that there are technical elements that one can trace throughout films that lie within the genre. Again some of these characteristics that have initially been developed within mountain film are now evident in the crossover between documentary and other forms of factual filmmaking. In summary I look at how the commercial and industrial structure of the mountain film genre serves to re-affirm its existence.

In Chapter Four I will present some ideas on documentary spectatorship in general and then with specific reference to mountain film. It is generally agreed that documentary carries latent expectations of its audience and the audience holds a distinct viewing perspective when in 'documentary viewing mode'. I will argue that in mountain or adventure filmmaking this relationship between viewer and film is clearly evident and that the genre generally conforms to audience perceptions of what constitutes a mountain film. I will particularly reference the work of Thomas Austin (Austin 2007) in examining audience reaction to Kevin Macdonald's *Touching the Void* (2003).

In Chapter Five I will examine some of the ethical concerns that face filmmakers working within a genre where the risks to participants and crew are very real. I broaden the discussion of ethics to look at some of the ethical dilemmas faced by documentary makers at large and how we can see evidence of these in specific films within mountain film.

A case study is provided by looking at my own experience in producing a film within the genre. Chapter Six looks at the production of *In The Shadow of the Mountain* – the creative component of this thesis. In this chapter I examine how the film sits in the tradition of mountain film and of our awareness as producers of audience expectations in producing a film destined for the mountain film festival circuit.

Chapter Seven looks at how adventure film has been used to communicate science and particularly environmental concerns. As a case study *Last Paradise* (2010) Clive Neeson's self-financed and directed film on the development of extreme sports in New Zealand provides a fascinating example of the use of the adventure film genre to communicate scientific and environmental ideas

Finally Chapter Eight will summarise the material presented and draw some conclusions. It will be argued that there is indeed a clearly defined sub-genre of mountain film within documentary with strong historical and practical antecedents.

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## **Note re Literature Review**

There is a general paucity of critical literature in this field.

An overview of the genre of Sport Documentary (McDonald 2007) only obliquely references the sub-genre of adventure documentary. Hattum (2007) observes the "limited critical language" available with which to take an academic analysis of works in this genre.

Throughout the thesis attempts have been made to gather critical reference so that this paper maybe used as a starting point for further academic study.

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## Chapter One:

### The Blurring of Definition - Defining a Genre.

Any attempt to define genre within the realm of documentary and indeed within film in general should be prefaced by the warning of John Corner: "Scholarship will never resolve the issue of definitions and borderlines, these will actually become more uncertain and 'thin' as audio-visual culture becomes more inter-generically fluid." (Corner 2008, pp 26-27)

Identification of genre has its limitations but the labelling and defining of genre provides audiences with systems by which to select and comprehend film. Steve Neale writing on the importance of genre in film stresses this link between genre and understanding:

"Genres are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labeled and defined genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render films, and the elements within them, intelligible and therefore explicable." (Neale 1990, p46)

The importance of the above relationship between audience and genre is examined in greater depth in Chapter Four of this thesis.

The repetitive nature of genre production and consumption produces active but indirect audience participation; successful genres are "stories the audience has isolated through its collective response." (Williams 1984, p123) For Neale the role of film industry publicity and marketing is integral to the construction and re-enforcement of genre identity:

"Genre is, of course, an important ingredient in any film's narrative image. The indication of relevant generic characteristics is therefore one of the most important functions that advertisements, stills, reviews and posters perform. Reviews nearly always contain terms indicative of a film's generic status." (Neale

1990, p49)

This has been labeled the 'inter textual relay' function of the industry and Neale goes on to stress the key nature of this role:

"This relay performs an additional, generic function: not only does it define and circulate narrative images for individual films, beginning the immediate narrative process of expectation and anticipation, it also helps to define and circulate, in combination with the films themselves, what one might call 'generic images', providing sets of labels, terms and expectations which will come to characterise the genre as a whole." (Neale 1990, p49)

Rick Altman (1989) has suggested a three-step process for how genre is critically established. Firstly a genre is identified by "a industrial/journalistic term" then

"Having established a preliminary corpus in this way, the role of the critic is next to subject the corpus to analysis, to locate a method for defining and describing the structures, functions and systems specific to a large number of the films within it." (Neale 1990, p50)

Finally "the critic using this method as a basis re-constitutes and re-defines the corpus." Individual texts are evaluated and weighed against the systems and structures of the genre and then deemed whether to sit within the genre or not.

Neale argues that the latter two processes must be re-iterated by the first – ie that there is continued media and industry re-affirmation of what constitutes the genre: "Memories of the films within a corpus constitute one of the bases of generic expectation. So, too, does the stock of generic images produced by advertisements, posters and the like." (Neale 1990, p51). Neale further stresses the importance of the concept of 'generic verisimilitude' – the idea that works within a genre are so defined as they conform to the rules of the genre. Their 'truth' as a genre piece is more dependent on this relation to the rules of the genre than to concepts of factual reality.

As new films are added to the body of a genre, and subsequently new advertising and imagery associated with the films, then the horizons of audience expectation also evolve. Genres evolve and are not static, continually hybridising and adding characteristics with time - all of which add to the historical identity of the genre. As such

genre is historically relative and is often anchored in art forms outside of film that may precede the existence of the genre within the film medium (for example it can be argued the antecedents to the mountain film genre lie within mountain and climbing literature). Amongst all this hybridisation, process and evolution it must be recognised that genres have dominant but not exclusive characteristics.

As a segue into the body of this thesis it is worth keeping in mind Neale's concluding recommendations:

"I would like to stress the need for further research, further concrete and specific analyses, and for much more attention to be paid to genres hitherto neglected in genre studies, like the adventure film for example ... This would mean 1) starting with a genre's 'pre-history', its roots in other media, 2) studying all films, regardless of perceived quality; and 3) going beyond film content to study advertising ... studio policy, and so on in relation to the production of films."  
(Neale 1990, p56)

Neale is of course analysing genre in relation to film generally. Before turning to the existence of genre or sub-genre it is important to acknowledge that there has been vastly more critical attention given to establishing the borderlines of documentary as a whole than there has to defining genre within documentary. The current state of documentary production has been summarised by Corner as being in a state: "where documentary elements have increasingly been combined with components from fiction, light entertainment and popular factual formats to produce a wide range of textual hybrids."  
(Corner 2002, p258)

However there have been continued attempts to define the boundary of documentary, particularly to delineate the boundary between documentary and fictional narrative film:

"Since documentary does not address the fictive space of classic narrative but historiographic space, the premise and assumption prevails that what occurred in front of the camera was not entirely enacted with the camera in mind. It would have existed, the events would have unfolded, the social actors would have lived and made a presentation of themselves in everyday life irrespective of the camera's presence." (Nicholls 1991, p78)

Or to quote editor and critic Dai Vaughan: “The moment you demand that a film should represent an event exactly as it occurred you are confronted not just with the practical difficulty but with the theoretical absurdity of such a requirement.” (Vaughan 1999, p88)

Critical divisions of documentary have been more focussed on modes of representation than on genre per se. In this field the work of Bill Nichols has been at the forefront. Nichols initially delineated four modes of representation within documentary (Nichols, 1991): Expository, observational, participatory, reflective. He then added two more modes, the poetic and the performative. (Nichols 2001). These modes trace an evolution of documentary and follow a rough chronology commencing with the poetic and culminating in the performative. Similar to genre, these modes are seen to be fluid and non-exclusive: “None of these modes expel previous modes; instead they overlap and interact.” (Nichols 1994, p95). Some current critical thinking in fact debunks the idea of Nichols’ modes entirely. Stella Bruzzi in her introduction to *New Documentary* states that: “Documentary has not developed along such rigid lines and it is unhelpful to suggest that it has.” (Bruzzi 2000)

Rather than here entering a debate on documentary form and its history I think it is more relevant to consider that very little critical analysis has been given to genre or sub-genre within documentary. Genre, as we have seen above, has components beyond just the thematic or stylistic. There has to be the further elements of audience recognition and industry re-affirmation. I assert that the academic critical framing of modes as defined by Nichols et al lacks these genre components; it is hard to imagine a marketing campaign featuring “The hot new expository documentary from Kevin Macdonald” or an audience attending the “Participatory Film Festival” or tuning to the “Observational Channel”. In looking for genre strains within documentary it seems that these are found within the framework that reflects audience and commercial realities.

Keeping in mind Corner’s limitations that opened this chapter there is still validity in exploring the idea of genre within documentary if only, as observed by Annette Hill, as it is a tool audiences use to relate to what they are watching:

“Programme makers draw on production traditions, referring to previous practices to construct a documentary similar to another type of documentary; and audiences draw on their knowledge of previous documentary to recognise it as a distinctive genre.” (Hill 2008, pp 217-218)

In his introduction to *Documentary Screens* Keith Beattie sets out to explore genre and strands within documentary: "Constructed as a genre within the field of non-fictional representation, documentary has, since its inception, been composed of multiple, frequently linked representational strands." (Beattie 2004, p1). Beattie sets out what he intends to define in his genre approach to documentary: "... the various subgenres of documentary ... are not textual codifications but general categories composed of works sharing orientations and conventions recognised by both the producer and the viewer." (Beattie 2004, p1). Beattie goes on to define the documentary sub-genres as he sees them:

"ethnographic film, direct cinema and cinema verite, autobiographical documentary, drama-documentary and documentary drama, indigenous documentary productions, compilation films and television documentary journalism." (Beattie 2004, p2)

Other academics have identified genre strands within documentary. Amy Hardie in an audience survey of cinema documentary identifies 14 documentary genres: adventure, music, political, social issues, natural world, science, war, environment, sports, biography, arts, film and filmmaking, travel, and history (Hardie 2008).

It would be of value to analyse these identified strands to see if each carries the audience and industry recognition that Neale requires to fulfil a definition of genre. It may be that television programming guides provide a clue to some of these delineations: "historical documentaries, science documentaries, autobiographical work, works 'based on a true story' and so on." (Beattie 2004, p2) It is here I would argue that some of these genre distinctions are reflected best by the nomenclature of television channels and film festivals: History, Animal, Living, The Arts channels; Science Film, Environmental and Mountain Film festivals. Within these frameworks there is an audience that comes with specific genre-based viewing expectations and there exists further a commercial infrastructure with broadcast and distribution networks that markets to this audience.

The intent of this thesis is not to examine in detail the options of defining genre (or sub-genre) within documentary though there is a huge scope for further academic investigation of this field. I instead focus on the genre of adventure film that would appear to have all the characteristics of a specific genre as suggested by Neale. It is therefore necessary to first look at the history of this genre (including its pre-history in

other media), establish its particular characteristics and pay respect to the structure of the commercial industry that sustains it.

## Chapter Two:

### History

#### Beyond the Cinema of Attractions<sup>1</sup>

The earliest example of mountain film was Frank Ormiston-Smith's 1902 film *The Ascent of Mont Blanc*. Joe Kember writing on British cinema prior to 1907 refers to a 1902 Warwick Trading Company catalogue with a two-page account of Smith's film. This catalogue details Smith's "perilous adventures in search of animated photographs," (Kember 2006, p12) and goes on to provide an apt description of the role mountain film fulfils:

"As we sit at our ease in the comfortable depths of an Alhambra stall, or lean over the cold front-rail of the crowded gallery and applaud the flashing pictures of the actual scenes living on the cinematograph screen before us, we are perhaps apt to forget that many of these pictures have been obtained at the imminent risk of life and limb, by the courageous 'operator' perhaps thousands of miles away." (Kember 2006, p12).

Kember here identifies the essence of the viewing experience – the viewer is sitting in the comfort of the picture theatre or in front of the television observing images depicting risk activity gathered via a filmmaking process that itself has inherent risk elements. This theme will be developed more fully in the thesis.

Since the earliest development of the moving image, filmmakers have utilised the form of the adventure quest as a vehicle for documentary expression. The first 'mountain' or 'adventure' films morphed from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century model of multi-media spectacle used to promote and finance expedition and exploration. As cited earlier in the case of Albert Smith these shows were hugely popular and represented a manifestation of the Victorian fascination with Romantic notions of nature, quest and epic adventure.

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<sup>1</sup> This term was adopted by film historians Tom Gunning and Andre Gaudreault. It is founded on the observation that early cinema largely relied on the visual medium as a 'trick' to attract viewers – cinematography was often just another attraction in vaudeville spectacle. Subsequently a narrative cinema starts to evolve, Gunning and Gaudreault identify this at about 1907. (Gunning 1990)

If, as suggested in Chapter One, one of the pre-cursors to definition of genre is the establishment of a history in other media forms it is here in 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic literature and spectacle that its origins lie. Themes important to this literary genre re-emerge in mountain film: the epic quests, the overcoming of adverse elements, travel and exploration can be seen as recurring themes within this body of literature. The subsequent development of a specifically mountaineering literature – a literary genre that continues to this day – sees the continued re-affirmation of the genre in another media form.

The longevity of this model might be explained in part due to the funding obligations of expeditions – books, film and speaking tours alongside sponsorship continue to this day as a primary method by which expeditions are funded – be they the fur company Revillon Freres sponsoring Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) or outdoor clothing manufacturer The North Face sponsoring a whole series of contemporary mountain films.

The progression from multi-media spectacle to film was progressive, this era of film has been analysed by Robert Dixon in his introduction to the career of early documentarian Frank Hurley:

“As early as the 1890s multi-media entertainments were integrating film with slides and sound effects. The American E Burton Holmes mounted a series of touring shows that featured his adventure travels to Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In 1904, Burton Holmes coined the term ‘travelogue’ to describe these new multi-media entertainments. Frank Hurley would later acknowledge him to be world’s leading practitioner of what Hurley himself called the ‘adventure film’.” (Dixon 2006, p63)

Film as a whole was at a turning point in its development. Till this stage the new medium had enough of a visual impact on audiences to survive merely depicting visual imagery. “Up until 1903 seventy-five percent of films were so called actualities” (Macdonald and Cousins 1996, p5). These were largely films depicting aspects of daily life, filmmakers such as the Lumiere brothers were enthralling audiences with *Workers Leaving The Factory* (1903); but even within these films the potential for vicarious experience was evident, audiences were reported as feeling nauseated due to the “prodigious effect on spectators” of the waves in *A Boat Leaving*



*the Harbour* (1896, dir Louis Lumiere). (Macdonald and Cousins 1996, p11)

As cited above, the first mountain film to receive wide distribution was the *The Ascent of Mont Blanc* (1902) by the American climber Frank Ormiston-Smith.

“This pioneering film was sponsored by the Warwick Trading Company, a harbinger of the ‘made for tv’ survival and adventure films of today ... like many early films, the Mont Blanc film had no real story line, just a record of the ascent of Europe’s highest mountain.” (*A Short History of Mountain Film*, Kendal 2009).

The success of *The Ascent of Mt Blanc* may have prompted the Warwick Company to produce further entertainments in a similar vein. Ormiston-Smith went on to make many more mountaineering actualities throughout the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Limited by the need to carry heavy equipment and limited in length by the amount of film one could carry these films consisted of sometimes single scenes specifically selected from Ormiston-Smith’s climbs in the Alps. These included *Climbing The Final Arete* (1902), *Grand Panorama From The Summit* (1902), *Crossing A Snow Bridge* (1902), *Ice Work On The Glacier Des Bossons* (1902), *Ascent And Descent Of The Aiguilles* (1902), *Ascending A Rock Chimney* (1902), *Ascent Of The Jungfrau* (1903), *The Accident on the Great Schreckhorn* (1903), *Surmounting the Summit of the Finsteraarjoch* (1905), *Ascent Of The Wetterhorn* (1905) and *Ascent And Descent Of The Dolomite Towers* (1906).

These early films were invariably accompanied by a lecture and presentation by the cinematographer or his agent:

“During exhibition of the films a lecturer would often detail the adventures of the intrepid cameramen, contributing directly to spectators’ embodiment of the films’ authorial personae by exaggerating the visual and ideological perspectives of the filmmaker.” (Kember 2006, p13).

A contemporary magazine the *Showman* described in 1902 a forthcoming film entertainment as “of a kind of trip round the world in an armchair.” (*Showman* 17, Jan 1902). Kember argues that there is a very early awareness of the vicarious experience being generated, and I would add the industry is seeking to very quickly establish this perception in the mind of the audience – here we see the earliest stages of genre

establishment. We can also observe the use of image and story elements already existent in other media.

“The description advertised a relationship in which the adventurer, perhaps doubled by the presence of a lecturer-adventurer during exhibition, became associated with the camera. This generic chief protagonist, derived from popular narratives of heroism and exploration, inevitably positioned the adventure-travelogue film within a shifting cultural context.” (Kember 2006, p15).

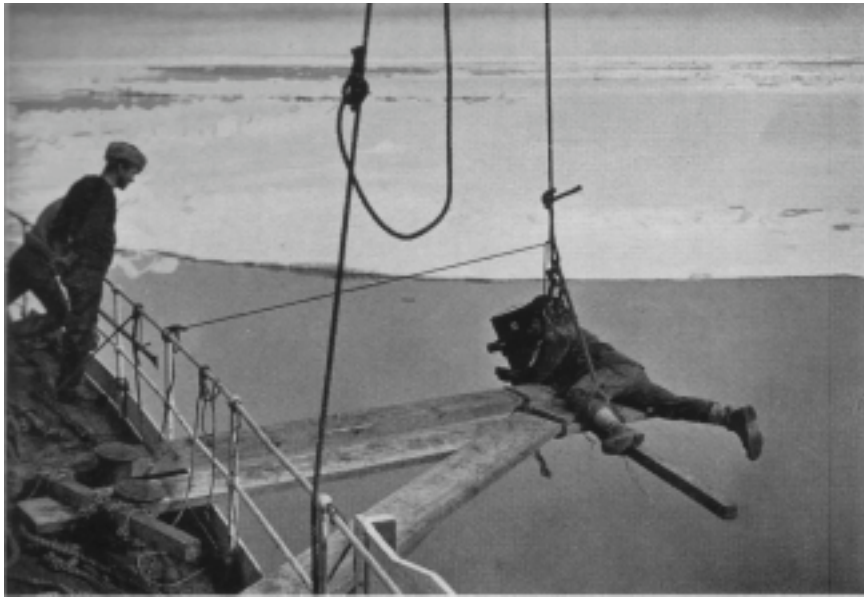
Around the same time, the intrepid Abraham brothers in the Lake District took their massive hand cranked camera up into the fells to film ascents of Napes Needle. That the boundaries of what was physically possible to film were being pushed at this stage is reflective of the waning popularity of the straight non-fiction reportage; as Macdonald and Cousins observe:

“Non-fiction films never regained the popularity they had during cinema’s first decade ... in order to secure any sort of popular appeal , proto-documentary makers were forced to film extremes of human experience.” (Macdonald and Cousins 1996, p17)

This waning of attention reflects the battle documentary has with fictional narrative that continues to this day: “Audiences wanted drama, tension and characters with whom they could empathise, but how could they find that in factual footage?” (Macdonald and Cousins 1996, p18. Very quickly, however, we see examples of early films within the genre that were amongst the first to move beyond the “cinema of attractions”.

## **The Cinema of Exploration.**

Though the next flowering of Mountain Film per se would not be till the Bergfilm of the 1920s in terms of Adventure Film we must consider the output of two key figures associated with the documentation of polar exploration; Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley. Examination of their work from 1910-1920 establishes many of the characteristics and develops the infrastructure of the Mountain Film genre.



from 'The Worst Location in the World: Herbert G Ponting in the Antarctic.' Dennis Lynch.

Ponting's film of Scott's Antarctic expedition *90° South*, was described by the French film academic Andre Bazin as the "archetype of all films of this genre" (Bazin 1971, p157) and by Dennis Lynch as "arguably the most important travel documentary prior to *Nanook Of The North*" (Lynch 1989, p291). Ponting filmed Scott's expeditions as photographer and cinematographer. His hands-on methods and willingness to embrace physical risk were hallmarks of his style and in the genre tradition of mountain film camera operators. Lynch observes this style in the ship-board shots taken on Terra Nova: "the angles from which they were taken showed that Ponting continued to risk life and limb for an expressive picture." (Lynch 1989, p296).

Ponting himself seemed awed by his own fearlessness – the language and tone echo of the tradition of the vaudeville showman: " 'As the ship bumped into the floes, I hung on as best I could, and with one arm clung tightly to my precious camera lest it should break loose and fall into the sea, whilst with the other hand I turned the handle'." (Dixon 2006, p66). He later commented that "In looking backwards I sometimes shudder at the risks I took so recklessly in those early days." (Lynch 1989, p297)

Ponting was one of the earliest documentarians to realise that moving images in themselves were not enough but required structuring to make a more compelling

narrative. Evidence of Gunning's concept of cinema moving from attractions to narratives at this time:

"His films do not have the aesthetic sophistication of some later travel documentaries, but they were head and shoulders above those of his contemporaries ... He was talented enough at photography to make visually interesting images; he was enough of a storyteller to understand how they must go together." (Lynch 1989, pp295-6)

Ponting made two significant silent editions of his Scott film, *With Captain Scott RN to the South Pole* 1912 and *The Great White Silence* 1913; and two sound versions, *90° South* (1933) and *The Story of Captain Scott* (1936). All of these films were met with critical acclaim, as Robert Dixon quotes from a contemporary review: "There is nothing in the theatres of London to approach this tale in pictures." (Dixon 2006, p66). A modern reviewer is equally impressed with the pacing and aesthetics of *90° South*:

"Throughout the film, Ponting's camera lingers sensually on what he offers us to see. This lingering forces active visual engagement by giving us time to imaginatively and empathetically enter the realm of the moving image. For example, as he sets out through turbulent southern seas, an elongated look at the ship's rolling deck does not just depict what happens in the story, but actually nauseates us." (Siebel 2003, pp175-176)

*90° South* also provides "the first example of a practice which is now common, the provision of a cinematic report as an integral part of the expedition." (Bazin 1971, p157). Ponting, with his background in the international media landscape of the time saw very clearly the opportunities for adventure film, in this case more so than Scott the expedition leader: "Ponting was stunned by Scott's lack of commercial acumen and naivety about publicity." (Dixon 2006, p65) As mentioned previously, this filming of expedition as a funding vehicle (both to fulfil sponsorship obligations and to recoup funds) is a model very much in use in the contemporary adventure film industry.<sup>2</sup>

Taking Ponting's lead and first assuming, then developing, the mantle of explorer/cinematographer was Frank Hurley. Hurley was, like Ponting, a photographer

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<sup>2</sup> For example Australian adventurer and filmmaker Jon Muir toured NZ in 2010 with a show that combines slides, a film *Alone Across Australia* (2003) and a lecture by the protagonist.

who had already a sound pedigree in the commercial world of multi-media shows. Ponting can be assumed to have had a direct influence upon him as Hurley had seen *Scott's Last Expedition* at least four times. As observed by Dixon:

“Hurley did not work in just one medium. He was ... an old-fashioned ‘showman’ whose repertoire Traveling Mass-Media Circus included both traditional and modern media, which he used in both old and new ways.” (Dixon 2006, p65)

Hurley was contracted to Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition in 1911. Until this point “early photographers attached to expeditions and surveys were known as ‘camera operators’. They were contracted to provide ‘views’, whose subjects were determined by the strategic or scientific purposes of the expedition.” Hurley over the course of the next decade would make the transition from hired hand to having editorial and financial control of his films. (Dixon 2006, p70)

Hurley further developed the idea of structuring a narrative of images to tell a story. Of *The Home of the Blizzard* (1913) the film he made from the Mawson expedition Hurley commented that: “I am determined to make the blizzard itself a subject for my film” (quoted from the documentary *Frank Hurley - The Man Who Made History* (2004). Dir Simon Nasht). It was in this film that Hurley showed a whole range of human experience that no one had seen on screen before. Hurley framed the film in the terms that would become the norm for the genre “A classic struggle between man and nature” (quoted from *Frank Hurley - The Man Who Made History*). The expedition becomes a contemporary example of the classical hero's journey.

Hurley was renowned for the lengths that he would go to get the perfect image. “My fingers froze, and often I was swept away by fierce gusts” (quoted from *Frank Hurley - The Man Who Made History*). By the time he left in 1913 to film Ernest Shackleton's Endurance expedition he was setting some of the techniques that would become an integral component of adventure film. Many of his shots were elaborately rigged to provide a ‘point of view,’ to heighten the vicarious experience of the audience. The sequence of the destruction of the Endurance in the pack ice was filmed with multiple cameras and Hurley risked harm in putting himself right on the limit of the ship's destruction. His film of the expedition *In the Grip of the Polar Pack Ice* (1919) became:

“Not just a film about the wreck of *Endurance*, but one about the making of the film of the wreck of *Endurance*, and the film’s miraculous survival and subsequent screening in Australia by the ‘intrepid’ cameraman. At this vanishing point of the cinematic illusion, the film becomes its own subject and the film-maker his own actor.” (Dixon 2006, p71).

Bela Balazs writing in 1945 – was enthralled at Hurley and Ponting’s ability to keep filming in spite of the extreme personal dangers they faced:

“Yes it is a new form of human consciousness that was born out of the union of man and camera. For as long as these men do not lose consciousness, their eye looks through the lens and reports and renders conscious their situation. The ice crushes their ship and with it their last hope? They shoot. The ice-floe melts under their feet? They shoot. They shoot the fact there is scarcely room for them to set up the camera.” (Balazs 1970)

Balazs stresses here how the relationship between man, camera and danger intensifies the viewing experience.

Hurley was aware of the developing audience pre-conceptions of the genre he was working in, developing not only narrative within the non-fiction film but also character – himself always at the forefront of his story. He wasn’t one to let the strict truth get in the way of a good story and developed the use of cinematic and photographic composites and re-creations that “best-represented” the truth from his point of view. One of his most famous photographs from the Shackleton expedition, purported to be Shackleton returning to rescue his men, was in fact taken as Shackleton sailed away several months earlier. This talent was not appreciated in his later wartime role as a military cinematographer.

Hurley maintained this early adoption of new technology throughout his career in adventure film, he was: “not only the ring master but also the leading attraction in his own traveling, international, multi-, mass-media circus.” (Dixon 2006, p74). In his film of the 1919 London to Sydney Air race *Sir Ross Smith’s Flight from England to Australia* 1920 Hurley integrated aerial photography and used this as a tool to help market the film: “The success of *Sir Ross Smith’s Flight* lay in Hurley’s entrepreneurial brilliance in linking the powerful new technologies of flight, cinema and aerial photography with

popular patriotic sentiments about nation and empire.” (Dixon 2006, p76). Adventure film’s relationship to new technology to increase the viewing thrill can be traced throughout the history of the genre.

Hurley’s talent as an adventure cinematographer is evidenced by the use of his footage in the 2002 film *Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure* that toured IMAX cinemas throughout the world. As Dixon observes:

“The experience of attending an IMAX cinema, with its self-reflexive emphasis on spectacular new technology and the overwhelming scale of its architecture, strongly recalls the early twentieth-century’s ‘cinema of attractions’. It is therefore highly significant that *Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure* literally incorporates sections of Hurley’s *In the Grip of the Polar Pack Ice* into the IMAX format... His original images of towering icebergs and the *Endurance* steaming out of the screen toward the audience are perfectly at home one hundred years later.” (Dixon 2006, p84)

While Ponting and Hurley were developing the “film of exploration” (Bazin 1971, p154) Frederick Burlingham was continuing the mountain film tradition established by Ormiston-Smith. Burlingham, an American, filmed several mountaineering films, largely in Switzerland, between 1913 and 1918. Remy Pithon comments that Burlingham assisted to develop mountain themes that were integral to Swiss cinema - the alpine landscapes and ascents of its celebrated peaks. Filmmakers like Burlingham “sometimes took considerable risks to provide their production companies with ever-new images.” (Pithon 2002, p41) In an article surveying the career of Burlingham, Gerry Turvey provides numerous examples of how the contemporary press reacted to the films. Of Burlingham’s first mountain film *Ascent of the Matterhorn* (1913) Turvey quotes:

“[a]lthough several pictures have been taken of mountain climbs, the essentially dangerous ascents have been left strictly alone until the present instance ... few [operators] would care to attempt such a feat as that accomplished.” (Turvey 2007, p169)

Burlingham was taking mountain film in a new direction of immediacy and perceived peril. Burlingham’s technology, though cutting edge for the time, was far

removed from the lightweight portability of modern equipment: “[Consisting of] a 15-kilo cinematograph camera (35 pounds), a 10-kilo tripod, and 1500 feet of film; also, there was a half-plate still camera and two 12-exposure film packs.” (Turvey 2007, p170)

Alongside technical innovation it is evident that Burlingham had developed a style and talent for his subject matter and had progressed beyond the long locked-down shots of Ormiston-Smith:

“the Kinematograph Weekly approvingly observed that there was no ‘glare’ appreciable in the pictures of snowfields, that the views were not interminably drawn out and that ‘some of the effects obtained, notably the battle of the elements around the summit, baffle[d] description’.” (Turvey 2007, p172)

There is also the recognition that it is his ability to be amongst the landscape alongside the climbers that provides this unique perspective:

“For pictures of snow scenery he has no peer, employing as he does unique methods for securing wonderful photographic quality. Intrepid in his negotiation of perilous positions Mr Burlingham is able to secure pictures of scenes where no other camera has been before.” (Turvey 2007, p174)

This awareness in the viewer of the presence of the cameraman within a potentially dangerous environment becomes established as characteristic of the genre.

Burlingham worked principally for the production company British and Colonial as a roving cameraman/producer. His films garnered huge popular appeal “particulars of his wonderful exploits being familiar to every man in the street.” (Turvey 2007, p174) It seems he had the unique ability to capture two strong themes that run through mountain film, the contrast between the climbers and the immensity of the landscape and the portrayal of these characters as resolute in the face of challenge:

“[a]gainst the towering background of heaped-up snow, the climbers are mere black specks which, with unconquerable energy and persistence move ever upwards despite all obstacles ... there is always the same impression of grim self-



reliance, doggedness, obstinacy, call it what you will—the sort of thing that has made men of all ages accomplish the apparently impossible.” (Turvey 2007, p176)

Through Burlingham’s brief career as a mountain filmmaker – essentially 1913-1918 – he managed to create the genesis of the genre. Given his output of work in this time and his popular success one can only assume that his audience had genre-expectation imbedded in their viewing perspective upon the announcement of a new Burlingham film. Further we can see that, by the time Burlingham left B & C for the Charles Urban Co, the industry had recognised that ‘Burlingham’ as a brand carried genre expectation that the industry was utilising as a marketing tool, as evidenced by this advertisement from the *Bioscope* trade magazine in 1916:



In the early history of factual filmmaking Burlingham played a substantial role in developing the related genres of the mountaineering film and the exploration film.

## Between the Wars

As observed in the introduction to the *Faber Book Of Documentary*: “In order to find its first really successful model, the documentary had to move further away from reality and adopt the dramatic and technical features of the fiction film.” (Macdonald and Cousins 1996, p18) It is generally accepted that the first satisfactory synthesis of story and reality was achieved until Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922). This film, though strictly it lies outside of the adventure genre, had significant implications on documentary as a whole as well as on mountain film in particular. The performative

elements Flaherty integrated into his documentary become a significant characteristic of later mountain film.

It is not until the 1920s that we see a significant development within the genre and this is reflected in a lack of literature. There would certainly be scope for further research into early adventure documentary.

## **Bergfilm**

With the arrival of the 20s and the emergence of the Bergfilm canon (1919-36) of German film – we see mountain film documentary first gain a wide audience and then spawn the fictionalised, politicised mountain film genre of Bergfilm that has had much critical and academic attention:

“Outstanding alpine landscapes, tremendous vastness, overwhelming forces of nature – these are the features of a film genre Weimar cinema has become especially famous for, and, indeed, even today is often associated with: the German Bergfilm.” (Buchholz 2004)

These are common themes we can trace through to the modern mountain film documentary.

Bergfilm had its origins in the early documentaries of Arnold Fanck. Fanck:

“regarded himself as an artist whose popular productions brought modern times renewed reverence for nature's incomprehensible majesty. With a relish for authentic locations, athletic daring, and technical resourcefulness, Franck gained renown as a director of film crews, snowscapes, and seas of clouds.” (Rentschler 1990, p141).

After initial efforts of a purely documentary basis, his mountain epics assumed narrative contours and a fixed ensemble: high altitude locations, a collective of male comrades, climbers, and guides - plus an obligatory female presence. Interestingly Franck himself – though considered the originator and prime exponent of Bergfilm - was somewhat disillusioned with the necessity of to add a narrative structure to what otherwise were aesthetically pleasing films of contemplation and meditation (Rentschler 1990, p141). The later films diverge from this and progress more to a fictionalised narrative of epic triumph over nature as well as integrating a

reinforcement of the National Socialist ideals of the era. This aspect of the genre, particularly the films of Leni Riefenstahl, has received wide critical attention but had developed far enough from its documentary roots to be less relevant to this thesis. It is interesting to note however that these attempts to add narrative to the original documentary structure were actually counterproductive in their intent to enhance the cinematic experience: "For all their masterful imagistic immediacy, these films are seriously inept - and misguided - in their negotiation of narrative terrain." (Rentschler 1990, p142)

These films do illustrate how firmly anchored in the pre-cinematic Romantic tradition the routes of the adventure and mountain genres lie:

"Mechanically re-produced images aim to rekindle in a contemporary mass (and vastly urban) public the 'pleasant stirrings' Kant once described as the mark of the beautiful and the sublime. The cinematic medium becomes a vehicle to simulate unmediated experience, a modern means of restoring pre-modern wonder and enchantment." (Rentschler 1990, p147)

The German mountain documentary did however continue to develop alongside the mainstream of Bergfilm and it is these films that have a direct effect on the development of the mountain film documentary genre; though given the era they contained a politicised overlay: "In this scheme, mountaineering was not simply a sport like any other [but] characterized by the existential struggle of man versus nature on one hand and nation against nation on the other." (Hobusch 2002).

This is particularly true of the Nanga Parbat Expedition films *Nanga Parbat* (Dir Frank Leberecht, 1936) and *Kampf um den Himalaja* (Leberecht, 1938). These documentations of the nationally sponsored expeditions to the world's sixth highest mountain were the most complete mountain film documentaries thus far produced:

"A second, closer look at the documentaries reveals a highly sophisticated arrangement and interplay of image and narrative designed to celebrate and thereby propagate, in a pseudo-religious manner such values as 'honor,' 'comradeship,' and, ultimately, 'self-sacrifice.' (Hobusch 2002).

These themes, with their origin in the Nazi propaganda of the 1930s, re-emerge time and

time again in adventure documentary.

The Nanga Parbat films both thematically and practically provide a bridge between Bergfilm and post-war mountain film: *Kampf um den Himalaja* was not in fact screened till 1951 in a re-edited production. As Hobusch observes: "We realize that in the search for 'viable legacies' National Socialist productions form a critical point of reference." (Hobusch 2002)

### **The Post-War Period:**

Writing in 1957 the critic Andre Bazin identifies the genre of 'exploration documentary.' (Bazin 1971, p155) Bazin observes that at this time the majority of films produced still follow the style of the old multi-media spectacle whereby: "this type of film is conceived as an illustrated lecture, where the presence and the words of the speaker-witness constantly complement and authenticate the image on screen." (Bazin 1971, p156)

In the realm of mountain film the 'official' documentation of national Himalayan expeditions tends to dominate the genre, for example *Victoire Sur L'Annapurna* (Marcel Ichac 1952) on the successful French expedition to Annapurna, the first to climb a peak of 8000m, and similarly *The Conquest of Everest* (George Lowe 1953), the record of the successful 1953 British expedition. Given their funding basis as integral parts of national expeditions it is not surprising that these films still contain nationalistic overtones similar to the Nanga Parbat films. Similarly, the heroes of these films are portrayed using the imagery of the classical hero, Bazin identifies the parallels to mythical quest found in this mode. Maurice Herzog, leader of the French expedition is portrayed as "the modern Orpheus on an ascent to a hell of ice." (Bazin 1971, p164)

Bazin further observes that the relationship between the film of the expedition and the expedition itself is complexly intertwined and that it is the film now that becomes the mode by which the expedition is recalled; he comments that though Herzog's book of his ascent is more detailed: "who can fail to see the difference between memory and that objective image [film] that gives it eternal substance." The technology of cameras had progressed so that equipment was now light enough to be present for most of the

expedition though, interestingly, not quite yet developed sufficiently to bring back images from the summit of either of these expeditions.

Outside of this production mode of the well-financed expedition film there are the first examples of the documentation of more lightweight low-cost adventure where the filming is an integral part of the adventure filmed by the participants themselves but not necessarily at a professional level - the quality of the filmmaking is carried by the extremity of the adventure itself. An example of this is *Kon Tiki* (Thor Heyerdahl dir 1951) a film that documents the traverse of the western Pacific in rafts modelled on those used in South America in Mayan times. *Kon Tiki* is shot by non-professionals, poorly exposed at times and has the singular characteristic that whenever the action got really exciting the camera was neglected as the participants were too involved with survival. However, as Bazin observes: "How much more interesting is this flotsam snatched from the tempest, than would have been the faultless and complete report offered by an organised film." (Bazin 1971, p162)

This model of adventure film, whereby expedition participants film themselves, can still be seen within modern adventure documentary. Bazin goes on to explore this relationship between the filmmakers and the intensity of the 'action' they are experiencing. Though key shots might be missed due to the sheer extremes of the environment, the evident proximity of the filmmaker to the action carries an inherent strength:

"The fact of the matter is that this kind of film can actually achieve a more or less successful compromise between the exigencies of the action and the demands of reporting. A cinematographic witness to an event is what a man can seize of it on film while at the same time being a part of it." (Bazin 1971, p162)

In further analysis of *Kon Tiki* Bazin identifies some of the elements that constitute a successful film within the genre, he observes that *Kon Tiki*, despite its technical inadequacies is:

"... an admirable and overwhelming film ... the making of it is so totally identified with the action that it so imperfectly unfolds; because it is itself an aspect of the adventure. Those fluid and trembling images are, as it were, the objectivised memory of the actors in the drama." (Bazin 1971, p163)

In comparison to films like *Kon Tiki* there were attempts at this time to produce dramatised re-creations of some historical adventure. An example of this was *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) that lavishly re-created in the studio and the European Alps the story of Scott's ill-fated polar expedition. Bazin observes that re-creations like this are almost inherently fatally flawed, that it is impossible to successfully "imitate the inimitable, to reconstruct that which of its very nature can occur only once namely risk, adventure, death." (Bazin 1971, p158) This is an early acknowledgement that successful film making in this genre must carry with it a sense of the immediacy of the experience.

## **Towards the Modern Mountain Film**

Mountaineering remained the primary focus of cinematographers within the genre of adventure documentary throughout the post-war era. There is very little critical review of documentary produced within the genre from this era and this would be an area for further research in providing a historical bridge between the pre-war period and the emergence of the modern adventure documentary.

The BBC started producing televised climbing from 1963 onwards; initially these televised documentaries focused upon rock climbs within Britain but by 1965 included a televised ascent of the Matterhorn. This climb heralds the first time the camera was able to join climbers on the climb itself. Paul Gilchrist writing in *Sport in History* identifies this turning point: "with new lightweight video recording equipment, it was the first time cameras followed the ascent, adding to the suspense." (Gilchrist 2007, p50)

Within the literature surveyed, the most thorough précis of adventure documentary comes from Gilchrist's analysis of the televised climb of the Old Man of Hoy – a sea stack lying off the coast of Western Scotland. This paper not only reconstructs the techniques and practicalities used to document the climb but also places the event within a historical context. In addition this paper introduces several themes developed within this thesis.

15 million viewers watched the July 1967 live BBC broadcasts of *The Old Man of Hoy*. It was the largest audience to have ever watched a live television broadcast at the time

(superseding the 1966 World Cup final!). The filming of the climb was the culmination of several years of development of techniques by the BBC team involved (including documentaries on climbing the Matterhorn and other climbing objectives). This included the grooming of a team of climbers who were aware of the needs of the film crew to produce effective television:

“Housewives and teachers were glued to their sets and felt as though they were climbing with Bonnington et al every step of the way. Like the Matterhorn climb two years previously, this was largely attributed to technical innovation. Mobile cameras provided intimate footage of the action and highlighted the precarious nature of modern climbing. Close-ups and distance shots gave the impression of individual emotion, group dynamics and the sheer scale of the venture. Oblique camera angles added to the sense of corporeal spectacle. One viewer commented that the pictures were so clear and so good that they induced vertigo. The TV reviewer for the Daily Mirror neatly summarized the show: ‘It was dizzying. Long shots of that towering shank of rock and the pin sized men gripped to its gritty sides. Close-ups of the climbers’ searching hands and spread-out groping fingers; of feet tentatively trying out, testing every new hold’.” (Gilchrist 2007, p56)

Gilchrist continues in an analysis of the processes by which effective filming was realised. The climbers involved had to develop an awareness of the needs of the film crew and of the viewing public: “The participants were aware of the need for mediated quasi-interaction, and so directed their behaviour towards the recipients of the pictures.” (Gilchrist 2007, p57) The climbers were also filmed discussing their motivations and the philosophies that drive their sport: “Ever the philosopher, Haston preferred to use the medium to share his outlook with others, to provide some insight into human motivation.” (Gilchrist 2007, p57)

The key criteria identified by Gilchrist here become, I believe, a good basis for the establishment of a theory of modern adventure documentary:

- The creation of specialist cinematic techniques.
- The development of specialist equipment for filming.
- The use of specialised crew highly skilled in the activity for both reasons of access

and authenticity.

- The generation of a vicarious experience for the viewing audience.
- The development of 'talent' who can perform for the camera and are aware of the viewers' needs.
- The awareness on behalf of the audience that they are not only witnessing a dangerous activity but that those who are filming on their behalf are also exposed to similar risk.

It is these criteria I will develop further within the thesis when examining the key characteristics of the genre.

Within the historical scope of the genre the popularity and reach of the mountain film was probably never greater than the 15 million who watched *The Old Man of Hoy*. Over the following decade the BBC would continue to produce mountain documentaries (for example *The 1975 British Annapurna Expedition* and *The 1978 British K2 Expedition*) as well as other adventure film (Sir Francis Chichester's 1967 sailing solo circumnavigation and *Search for Excitement*, *The 1978 British Karakoram Canoe Expedition*). These documentaries continued to maintain the link back to the Romantic philosophies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Commenting on *On the Rock Face* (1980, Ron Padula dir), a BBC documentary on an ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite, J A Walter observes: "many of the camera shots are surely designed to induce fear, Burke's feeling for the sublime, in the non-climbing viewer." (Walter 1984, p75)

Walter further observes that the canon of BBC film from this period is exploiting a viewer interest that exists across multiple media:

"Sitting in a living room vicariously watching Himalyan exploits on the television or reading about them in the Sunday papers, or sitting in a car with binoculars viewing the climbing cliffs above Llanberis Pass – the outside voyeur is like the expectant father biting his nails." (Walter 1984, p75)

Academics have observed that within this era of mountain film, with its development of the performative aspects of documentary protagonists, lies the origins of the modern reality genre. The era:



“... roots the genealogy of reality TV beyond vacuous celebrity programmes ... prompting us to take into account how celebrity culture was developed and how, as perhaps is the case now in climbing, the commodified star image became so important to the ability to seek adventure.” (Gilchrist 2007, p60)

We have seen that through its history mountain film has cultivated the heroic protagonist and developments in technology at this time were utilized to intimately characterise the adventurer.

### **Werner Herzog**

Meanwhile, German director Werner Herzog was re-kindling the romantic concepts developed in by the Bergfilm canon in a series of documentaries featuring protagonists “possessed by the desire to reach heights that they are told cannot be reached.” (Prager 2003, p24). These include the ski jumper Walter Steiner in *The Great Ecstasy of the Woodcarver Steiner* (1974), the pilot Dieter Dengler in *Little Dieter needs to Fly* (1997) and most relevant to this thesis the mountaineer Reinhold Messner in *The Dark Glow of The Mountains* (1984).

As Herzog himself commented “I liked the idea of creating a new, contemporary form of mountain film.” (Cronin 2002) Though this statement alludes to the development of a modern Bergfilm Herzog later downplays any direct link to Riesenstahl et al. That the roots of *The Dark Glow of The Mountains* lie firmly in the older school are evident:

“As Herzog films the white mountain slopes ... it is the landscape that is most important, that fills the screen and dominates the image ... a landscape that in which dimension and distance are difficult to determine and in which perspective is almost illusory.” (Watson 1992, p169)

The exploration of risk, the charting of human potential in the face of this risk and the relationship of camera to the landscape are themes that resonate throughout Herzog’s work:

“Danger, death, alterity and sublimation have obsessed Werner Herzog throughout his wayward career. He has hurled himself repeatedly against

the limits of the human, filming the outrageous aspirations of individuals and of entire cultures within fierce landscapes that stand indifferent or belch back.” (Jeong and Andrew 2008, p1)

These themes similarly can be traced within mountain and adventure documentary and Herzog’s influence has been traced in contemporary productions. Critics have observed, for example, that *Big River Man* (2008), John Maringouin’s feature on long distance swimmer Martin Strel, reflects Herzog’s influence: “The man [Schiel] is a mad obsessive and one is surprised that he hasn’t ended up in the exotic trophy room of Werner Herzog, whose films *Big River Man* resembles.” (French 2009)

Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005) shares characteristics in common with an emerging trend within adventure film of the reconstruction of documentary recovered posthumously from protagonists directly confronting death and losing out. Ethical issues surrounding this in the context of adventure film will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## Contemporary Mountain Film

A review of critical writing on modern mountain film is brief; despite the breakout success of *Touching the Void* there has been little academic attention paid to the myriad of films that find an audience through the adventure film festival circuit or on dvd (often marketed direct to the target audience via sport-specific magazine or website). It is this development of a unique distribution network over the past twenty years that has probably been the biggest driving force in the shaping of the genre. This nurturing of a ‘captive’ audience on the festival circuit has, I believe, had an impact on the style of production. The development of relatively cheap, lightweight yet high quality camera equipment mirrored by a similar development in editing soft-ware has allowed filmmakers to produce documentary of expeditions or profile extreme sport practitioners without needing large budgets or crews. Corporate sponsorship – particularly by gear manufacturers – remains an integral element in the financing of these films. This is re-enforced by the benefits to sponsors of knowing that the films have a guaranteed distribution outlet to an audience with a pre-existing interest in the subject. Costs of entering films in mountain and adventure festivals are relatively cheap and this further re-enforces the production model.

Filmmakers such as the North Face, Warren Miller, Teton Gravity Research produce films on an annual basis; festival audiences anticipate the new year's film. There is an anticipated style, content and mode of representation. In some ways these documentaries have become almost formulaic. The historical development of adventure film has led to a commercial infrastructure that re-affirms the relationship of filmmakers, distributors, sponsors and audience – almost to the point whereby these films have been 'ghettoised' and break-out successes rare.

The following chapter will further examine the specific characteristics the history of the genre has established and Chapter Four will focus on the particular relationship between audience and mountain and adventure documentary. I will reference specific contemporary examples from the genre to illustrate these concepts.

In looking to the future of the genre perhaps the field of docudrama will provide the direction. Audrey Salkeld writing on the 2008 docudrama *Nordwand* (dir Phillip Stozl) goes on to place *Nordwand* at once as a part of the tradition of Bergfilm and at the same moment surpassing it: "*Nordwand* is a technical feat and a piece of storytelling beyond the scope of the original Bergfilm: maybe it signals a rebirth of the mountain film for the 21<sup>st</sup> century." (Salkeld 2009).

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## **Chapter Three:**

# **The Genre Characteristics of Mountain and Adventure Film.**

### **Mountain Film - a Genre.**

As the preceding historical analysis has illustrated mountain and adventure film has evolved into a strongly identifiable sub-genre within documentary. This chapter will focus upon the specific characteristics of documentary within the genre. Many of these characteristics have been identified in the historical review.

To summarise this history in respect to genre definition we can establish that mountain film has:

- A relationship to a pre-history in other media.
- A relationship to a similar genre in other media.
- Identifiable common story and subject elements.
- Identifiable common technical elements.
- A commercial infrastructure that re-enforces genre identity.
- An audience that recognises and anticipates the genre characteristics.

This chapter will look in greater detail at these characteristic elements. While an individual film may not have all the attributes detailed we can identify a film as characteristic of the genre if it exhibits a general commonality with other works.

### **Story Elements Characteristic of Adventure Film**

As identified within the historical overview there is a consistency in the story structure of the majority of works within the genre. Most films establish a quest and focus upon a central protagonist or team that is pursuing the quest. The large amount of material that is produced as 'expedition film' follows the straightforward lineal plot of the epic structure; the challenge/quest is established, hero(es) introduced, their progress in the pursuit of their goal is followed.

For example the opening shot of *Alone Across Australia* (2003), Jon Muir's self-directed film, is plain text on black across the screen:

"This film is an account of Australian Adventurer Jon Muir's quest to walk 2500 kilometres (1600 miles) alone across Australia."

Similarly Jennifer Peedom's *Solo* (2008) a film of Andrew McCauley's solo attempt to kayak the Tasman Sea establishes the quest in similar fashion:

"... alone for more than 30 days, crossing 1600 kilometres of one of the wildest and loneliest stretches of ocean on Earth."

In the modern form of the mountain film this pattern becomes almost formulaic. In the First Ascent series of climbing documentaries, screened on the National Geographic Channel in 2010, each episode follows a similar narrative structure – the quest is quickly established using a montage of high action images, the hero(es) introduced - generally via a series of interviews of contemporaries and expert practitioners - and then finally the central protagonist speaks to camera framing the quest in personal terms.

*Alone on the Wall* (Peter Mortimer, 2010) is an example from this series. It quickly establishes the quest, climber Alex Honnold is going to 'free solo' (ie climb unroped) the north west face of Yosemite's Half Dome, cue montage of shots from the climb; the language of the narration reiterates the "high stakes," and "extreme" nature of the quest. The hero is introduced via interviews of others: "the boldest of the bold, he doesn't feel fear like normal people." Honnold is then interviewed to humanise our hero and the story continues to follow the linear development of Honnold's build up and execution of the climb.

This use of the classical hero construct lies at the heart of most mountain film. Thomas Austin commenting on *Touching the Void* (dir Kevin Macdonald, 2003), the film of mountaineer Joe Simpson's book that recounted his epic survival tale in the Andes, observes the universality of this theme:

"Simpson's trajectory – from successful ascent to disaster, injury, endurance and ultimate survival - can also be seen to accord with a template of (usually male) heroism familiar from many cultural representations." (Austin 2007. p69)

The appeal of this 'survivor genre,' is acknowledged by the film's producer John Smithson: "... survival is a great genre because it's about the human condition. Documentaries are about people. People in extraordinary real-life situations." (Austin and de Jong, 2008. p162). Smithson further comments on the need for a strong storyline- particularly if a film is to go to theatrical release: "(a) it's the power of the story; (b) I think it needs the intimacy of an individual story and preferably if that individual story has a universality about it." (Austin and de Jong, 2008. p163)

The universality of the hero quest manages to span the gap between the viewer and the practitioner even if the protagonist is on a quest way beyond the realm of the viewing audience. As Austin observes: "Even if Simpson's adventure was pretty far removed from non-climbing viewers' experience at least, it seemed to provide a powerful fantasy scenario for imaginings of heroic perseverance and triumph." (Austin 2007. p68)

The story structure of the hero quest can be observed throughout all stages of the genre's development and remains a key characteristic of contemporary texts.

### **Practical Elements Characteristic of Adventure Film**

In addition to the commonality of the story structure in most adventure film we can also trace common practical elements. These characteristics exhibit similarities both in the technical arena and in the development of crew and 'talent'. As identified by Gilchrist (2007) in his analysis of the *The Old Man of Hoy* some of the attributes of adventure film are:

1. The creation of specialist cinematic techniques.
2. The development of specialist equipment for filming.
3. The use of specialised crew highly skilled in the activity for both reasons of access and authenticity.
4. The development of 'talent' who can perform for the camera and are aware of the viewers' needs.
5. The awareness on behalf of the audience that they are not only witnessing a dangerous activity but that those who are filming on their behalf are also exposed to similar risk.
6. The generation of a vicarious experience for the viewing audience.

I will analyse the first four points within this chapter and move on to analyse the final two in Chapter Four within a wider survey of audience perspective within the genre.

### **1. The Creation Of Specialist Cinematic Techniques.**

Through the historical survey we can start to trace the development of cinematic techniques that have an intrinsic relationship to films within the genre, some of these techniques are more remarkable as they are rarely used in other documentary genre. While not all films will use these techniques they can certainly be identified as characteristic.

Perhaps the most distinguishable camera technique to the mountain film is the use of the zoom. Zoom shots are generally avoided in factual filmmaking - the eye does not have the capacity to zoom and therefore it has been suggested that repeated zoom shots are disorienting for the viewer. However within mountain film there is a technical challenge - characters must be placed in the landscape and their physical relationship to it established for the viewer. To quote Dai Vaughan:

“If you frame for the people, you get no idea of the size of the mountain; if you frame for the mountain I can no longer see the people. A slow pull back links the two ... the zoom takes on the grammatical function of the preposition.” (Vaughan 1999. pp144-155)

The zoom, within a single shot, places the character in their environment.

In his analysis of *Touching The Void* Thomas Austin observes the frequent use of this technique:

“Audience members’ interest in the both the characters and the terrain in which they are located is matched in some ways by Macdonald’s repeated use of zooms and reverse zooms to delineate the relationship between these two elements.”(Austin 2007. p66)

The challenge within mountain film is to convey the immensity of the landscape, its threatening and challenging nature, while simultaneously conveying that your human protagonists are at once challenged by this and yet have a relationship with the

landscape based on this challenge. The inability to contain this landscape within a single frame has also seen the development of the use of the long slow pan. In *The Dark Glow of the Mountains* (1984), director Werner Herzog utilises this technique to open the film. Scott Watson has observed:

“Herzog begins the film with a slow, extended pan along the ridges of the Gasherbrum Range which Messner and Kammerlander will climb ... The ridges seem endless. Being a pan it is not a long held shot in a strict sense, but it has the effect of a long held image since it is an extended pan of a continuous silhouette. Its emotional impact comes from the hint or indication of the difficulty, the danger, and the duration of the endeavour about to be undertaken.” (Watson 1992. p176)

A similar device is the long helicopter tracking shot, again seen most frequently as an opening or establishing shot. The IMAX giant screen film *Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure* (George Butler dir, 2001) opens with a long helicopter shot of the coastline of the Antarctic continent. Like Herzog's pan the duration of the shot stresses the immensity of the landscape against which our heroes perform their quest. The title sequence of *Solo* similarly uses a long tracking shot of the Southern Ocean, nothing but giant waves and the immensity of the seascape are seen in the shot and the shot is held long enough to augment the sense of scale.

When humans are introduced to this frame the sense of scale is accentuated. Herzog in *Dark Glow* frames the departing climbers as minute compared to the scale of the mountains they are attempting to climb. Messner in the film is quoted “you realise how small you really are, how helpless” and “Herzog created an image to illustrate the relationship between humans and nature.” (Watson 1992. p178). As Watson observes this framing stresses the contrast between man and environment: “Herzog's images illustrate humans in natural landscapes in which their survival is threatened or precarious. Against the power of the natural environment, humans appear small and insignificant.” (Watson 1992. p179)

Watson goes on to highlight the complexity of this relationship between humans and the landscape and how Herzog's images illuminate this:

“On one level the images produce a compelling sense of the relationships



between individual climbers and a specific natural landscape, relationships with rushing rivers, steep mountain slopes, glaciers, vast snowy fields, storms, crevasses, sheer rock faces, and avalanches, relationships of powerlessness, precarious survival, loneliness and insignificance. (Watson 1992. p180)

It is an attempt to convey this complexity in film that has resulted in the development and frequent use of the techniques analysed here in mountain and adventure documentary.

Similar in its attempt to address issues of scale in the expression of the epic tale is the extensive use of time-lapse photography. It is rare to see contemporary mountain films that don't contain a time-lapse sequence. Time-lapse serves to not only signify the duration of an expedition but like the slow zoom or pan allows the camera to linger on a shot allowing the audience to develop a relationship with the landscape through concentrated time.

## **2. The Development Of Specialist Equipment For Filming.**

The relationship between equipment and specific film techniques is well illustrated in the development of time-lapse technology. As this equipment has decreased in weight, size and complexity it has become a practical option in the field for mountain and adventure film with its requirements for mobility. In a field that often operates with relatively small budgets the decrease in the cost of such footage has made this technique a viable option. The ease with which digital still frames can be built into image sequences has extended the use of this technique throughout the genre.

In a historical perspective the development of portable sound-sync technology had a great impact on mountain film (as it did upon all documentary). Field sound recording not only maximised the impact of source sound of images of avalanche and ice falls but it facilitated the advent of one of the key performative aspects of mountain film; the piece to camera or interview framed as the action happens. Thus by 1967 and the ascent of The Old Man of Hoy the climbing talent are able to articulate to camera their thoughts and feelings direct from the cliff face. This technique is one of the key characteristics of mountain film and in *The Old Man of Hoy* we see some of the earliest use of a technique

that has come to be a staple element of the entire genre of 'reality' tv.

Similarly the development of high quality, portable and robust cameras (see Chapter Two) made it possible to capture the intimate close ups on the climbs themselves. The impact of the immediacy of this upon audiences is discussed further in Chapter Four.

The development of equipment specialised for adventure filming has continued. Helmet cameras were developed for use within the genre to provide 'point of view' (POV) shots of the individual's participation in the action. The fact that many practitioners in these sports are already wearing helmets easily enabled the adoption of this technology. The helmet camera or POV shot is omnipresent in modern adventure film, in some ways it generates the most vicarious of viewing experiences. The majority of adventure sport clips on YouTube consist of short examples of POV footage, be the activity base-jumping, surfing, kite-surfing or climbing. There are now whole films released using this mode of shooting. For example *Mont Blanc Speed Flying* (Didier Lafond 2008) features a single continuous POV shot of a speed flying (a hybrid parachute / para-glider) descent of Mt Blanc set to music. This film has seen wide distribution and was selected best short film at the 2008 Banff Mountain Film festival.

Small mobile cameras stimulated other developments. Pole cameras and specialist rigging were produced to provide unique angles to the adventure activity. These techniques have been adopted in the filming of wildlife and reality television.

### **3. The use of specialised crew highly skilled in the activity for both reasons of access and authenticity.**

Daniel Hattam in a critical analysis of sky-diving films acknowledges the importance that cinematographers in adventure sport are expert practitioners of the activity for effective realisation of events:

"In a parallel to the film cultures of skating, surfing, ski and snowboarding, the sport of skydiving has a special relationship with its own cinematic representation because of its intimate ties with the production of skydiving films." (Hattam 2007)

Hattam goes on to categorise what he labels “internally produced sky diving film” within the broader cannon of documentary. These films he argues could be defined as interactive documentary as defined by Izod and Kilborn (1998, p430). The use of lightweight equipment and a close crew/subject interaction are key to interactive documentary and Hattam observes similar practice in sky diving film and other adventure sport documentary.

Hattam also identifies the visual presence of cameras in shot as a common feature in sky diving film and alludes to a tradition in documentary tracing back to Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) whereby the delineation of the person filming and being filmed is not as rigid in as in other genres. Audience acceptance of camera in shot or at least their tacit acknowledgement that there is a crew present in addition to the protagonist is a common feature of adventure sport documentary.

For many adventure films the fact that camera crew are themselves expert practitioners is a matter born of necessity, for many filming scenarios the crew must be expert practitioners of the activity being filmed - even to access the environment where the filming is to occur requires this level of expertise. Many cinematographers in adventure film were advanced practitioners prior to their filming careers, this dates back to mountain film’s earliest incarnation; Fredrick Burlingham for example was an accomplished climber and writer of mountaineering books before creating films in the genre.

To record the images required to dramatically replicate the activity for the audience the crew must be able to access the tight shots, the close ups – the shots that facilitate the vicarious experience. Be it mountaineering, rock climbing or base jumping the shots that provide the extra dramatic tension often stem from this accessibility. *Touching The Void* for example used not only specialist camera operators but also a team of specialist guides and riggers so that even the director Kevin Macdonald – a non-climber – could access the action unfolding.

The access provided by the utilisation of experts functions on another level. The relationship between crew and the subjects becomes critical in filmmaking that places an importance on getting subjects to deliver performatively for the camera. If the filmmaker possesses credibility within the physical and social setting then access is easier – the protagonist can relate to the camera in the knowledge that the operator has a shared

background of what is being experienced. For example in expedition filming the success of the shoot is dependent on the imbedded relationship between crew and expedition members – there must be a high level of respect and mutual trust. As a result we now see in the realm of adventure film many of the leading producers are former high performers in their specialist field; for example David Breashears in mountaineering, Todd and Steve Jones in extreme skiing, Greg Noll in big wave surfing.

The downside to the self-referential nature of filmmakers within the genre is discussed by Joanne Kay and Suzanne Laberge (2002). In analysing the adventure skiing films of Warren Miller the writers highlight that the self-referential process is taken to its extreme in Miller's films with their incessant referencing to the Miller 'brand' and repeated inclusion of images of the Miller crews at work:

"The self-conscious performances in Miller's films also exemplify quintessential capitalist kitsch offering the viewer only a commodified tracery of the spontaneous gesture." (Kay and Laberge, 2002)

#### **4. The development of 'talent' who can perform for the camera and are aware of the viewers' needs.**

"We had to show the public how we climbed, but at the same time we had to make it visually interesting ... The challenge was to try to put across to the lay viewer what climbing entails - not just the obvious sensationalism, but how I, the climber, feel, as I work my way up a stretch of rock which is common-place to me, but unbelievably difficult and dangerous to the beholder." (Mountaineer Chris Bonnington quoted in Gilchrist 2007. pp49-50)

Bonnington was the star performer of the BBC mountain films of the sixties and seventies. It was not just that he was photogenic and a talented climber but that he quickly realised that for effective communicating there was a performance aspect required. The idea that a performance may be required to present a truth, as Bonnington articulates, is a concept that documentary critics have explored since Robert Flaherty had the Eskimo Nanook act out scenes of his life in 1922 (*Nanook of the North*).

Stella Bruzzi writing in *New Documentary* establishes the "notion of the performance for the camera as the 'ultimate document', as the truth around which a documentary is

built.” (Bruzzi 2007. p126) She goes on to insist that we must “... acknowledge that performance – the enactment of the documentary specifically for the camera – will always be the heart of the non-fiction film.” (Bruzzi 2007. p155)

John Corner has commented that reality television has “presented us with modes of observation in which degrees of self-consciousness and openly performative display to camera are routine. This has generated new lines of relationships with viewers.” (Corner 2008. p24). The BBC mountain films of the 60s and 70s recognised and developed this new relationship with viewers and provided the antecedents to some of the techniques seen in modern reality television.

This performative aspect is perhaps most marked when protagonists in documentary are filming themselves. Two recent successful adventure films *Solo* (Jen Peedom, 2008) and *Alone Across Australia* (Jon Muir, 2003) consist in large part of footage shot by the adventurers themselves. This includes large amounts of to-camera interview as well as scenes that have obviously been carefully constructed with the camera in mind. Jerry Rothwell commenting on the form of this sort of self-shot footage in Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2003) observes that this is “a form of intimate performance to camera increasingly common ... an odd combination of private confessional and public performance.” (Rothwell 2008. p152) Both *Solo* and *Alone Across Australia* feature intense moments of self-realisation. This is perhaps an example of mountain film adopting and adapting characteristics that have become part of the wider documentary experience: “The use of self-shot footage of intimate moments is becoming part of documentary language and one of the ways that new technologies are transforming documentary practice.” (Rothwell 2008. p153)

Director Jennifer Peedom observes in the directors’ commentary to *Solo* that the way the protagonist Andrew McCauley set up shots showed his awareness of the needs of the film to best convey his story – for example he goes to great lengths to set up a shot of him receiving a sat phone call, this in 7 metre seas and freezing temperatures. Similarly in *Alone Across Australia* director/protagonist Jon Muir films himself alone in the desert. Several shots feature Muir moving through frame dragging his 150kg sled – the viewer is aware that Muir must have ran ahead, set up his camera, walked through frame, then returned for the camera; given the feat that Muir was undergoing his awareness of the need to construct shots in such a way and determination to complete them is astounding.

Performance has become an intrinsic characteristic of adventure film. The ethical implications of these notions of performance are discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five.

### **Industrial elements re-enforcing genre perception in Adventure Film**

In Chapter One I established that for a genre to be recognised and sustainable it requires a commercial or industrial infrastructure that re-affirms the identifiable features of the genre. As discussed in the introduction in mountain and adventure film this role is largely fulfilled by its core distribution base – the mountain and adventure film festival circuit.

As Annette Hill has observed “Genre expectations are dependent on production contexts.” (Hill 2008. p229) The production context of much of the output of films in the genre is focussed on this festival release. I will focus on how this context impacts on viewer expectation in the following chapter but, for now, will examine how this functions in relation to the industrial process.

The key impact of this distribution structure is that it has made the majority of contemporary adventure film dependent on corporate sponsorship. Festival distribution brings very little in the way of residual finance back to producers. Though some film within the genre has garnered wider theatrical or broadcast attention, for the most part producers are faced with a principal distribution vehicle that offers little in the way of financial return.

What the festival structure does offer, however, is the market of a captive audience with a specific interest in the subject matter of adventure and the outdoors. To corporate sponsors this market is nicely targeted by the featuring of their branding and products through the vehicle of adventure film. Little research has been conducted into the nature of these festival audiences but anecdotally it is suggested that this is an audience with a specific interest in recreation and with a disposable income.

This reliance on sponsorship has historical antecedents and has provoked debate in the past over whether the adventure industry is ‘selling out’.

“Eric Shipton, the leading Himalayan mountaineer from the 1930s to 1950s, was unenthused by the media’s interest, feeling that publicity

contaminated the real value of undertaking climbing - exploring and contending with a mountaineering problem in the company of likeminded men. ... 'mountaineering ventures are best financed from private sources as this precludes the necessity of undesirable publicity'." (Gilchrist 2007, p46)

Needless to say, the sponsors of these films have a vested interest in continuing the existing cycle of distribution. Both festival advertising and dvds prominently display sponsors logos and every effort is made to forge a link between the product and the adventures being filmed.

Within the promotional material of mountain festivals there are examples of the industry consciously re-enforcing the genre framework of mountain film. Banff Mountain Film Festival in its advertising refers to filmmakers in the "mountain film genre" and repeated reference is made specifically to the concept of a mountain film genre – promoters have realised that the festival audience has a loyalty to this genre concept and are actively endorsing it.

Outside of the festival framework contemporary mountain film has had few other avenues for distribution. The exception has been the occasional break out success at theatrical release, most notably *Touching the Void*, and more recently the adoption and promotion of the *First Ascent* series of climbing films on the National Geographic Channel. The televising of this series was the direct result of exposure of the first two films in the series to National Geographic executives at the Banff Mountain Film Festival. It is interesting to note that the promotion of the series that followed is couched very much in the familiar language of the mountain film: "First Ascent follows the greatest climbers to majestic locations around the globe on their quests to redefine what is possible in the mountains." (First Ascent series teaser, National Geographic Channel) The focus is on the "... amazing feats and personal journeys ..." of the climbers featured in the series. The advertising ticks all the boxes to confirm mountain film genre expectations:

"With cameramen following every step of the way, the series captures the unyielding determination, heart-stopping moments, emotional rollercoasters and spectacular visuals that can only be seen from hundreds of metres above a sheer

cliff face.”

It will be interesting to observe if this series manages to be successful in a market wider than the festival circuit.

In this chapter I have sought to illustrate how mountain films share some identifiable genre characteristics and how, with a commercial infrastructure actively re-enforcing these traits, this perpetuates and strengthens the genre’s identity. The following chapter will examine how the audience reacts to these characteristics and their relationship with the industry process.

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## **Chapter Four:**

### **Issues of Spectatorship in Documentary.**

#### **Contemporary Theory of Documentary Spectatorship.**

“Further work on documentary audiences offers its possibilities of exploring more thoroughly the specific kinds of relationship between form, content and viewing satisfaction.” (Corner 2008, p22)

The above quote from John Corner highlights the value audience research can add to the understanding of documentary. The fact that further work is required highlights that this is a field that has received little academic attention. As Thomas Austin observes:

“Audience perspectives on screen documentary remain significantly under-researched ... it seems odd then that scholarly work on this mode has for so long ignored one crucial way in which documentaries exist in the world – via audiences’ engagement with them.” (Austin 2003, p3)

The difficulties involved in empirically assessing audience opinion have been well spelt out: “We can with a reasonable degree of reliability ascertain who watches television. What goes on in their heads is another matter.” (Whannel 1998, p229)

Before focussing on the specific relationship of the audience to mountain film documentary I will present a brief précis of contemporary criticism in the field. Increasingly it is argued that an audience’s perception of a film may provide the key to defining and classifying just what is documentary – critically this has proved to be more and more of a challenge in what Corner has called:

“The ‘post-documentary’ culture of television, where documentary elements have increasingly been combined with components from fiction, light entertainment and popular factual formats to produce a wide range of textual hybrids.” (Corner 2002, p258)

Annette Hill who has been at the forefront of research on documentary audience observes:

“In contemporary television, documentary has become stylised, drawing on hybrid forms ... mixing fact and fiction in a variety of documentary modes. The large range of documentaries ... makes it difficult for viewers to adopt a single mode of engagement.” (Hill 2008, p217)

A lot of research has focussed upon how audiences balance the truth and reality of documentary with its representational aspects. Stella Bruzzi, in her introduction to *New Documentary* argues that this area is actually more straightforward than theorists have made out:

“The pact between documentary, reality and spectator is far more straightforward than these theorists make out: that a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational. Furthermore the spectator is not in need of signposts or inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other.” (Bruzzi 2007, p4)

Hill in looking at documentary audiences in general has observed that the documentary audience is highly diverse: “The first thing we can say about documentary audiences is that there is no one type of viewer, but many types of viewers who have culturally specific responses to particular kinds of documentaries.” (Hill 2008, p218)

The diversity of this audience is seen in the results of Amy Hardie’s survey of feature documentary audiences. She further provides some clues as to audience motivation and their expectation of the documentary viewing experience:

1. The audience go to see a documentary in the cinema because of its subject matter
2. There is no one documentary audience, unlike the art house audience, and they are largely defined by subject interest with little cross-over between audiences.
3. Rural and Urban audiences have different priorities across programming, advertising and behavioural preferences, suggesting that they could be targeted differently to maximize the number and satisfaction of the audience.
4. In spite of the rapid increase in documentaries available in cinemas, for approximately half our respondents, it was still the first time they had seen a documentary on the big screen.
5. There remains widespread confusion over what a documentary is, and whether it is something that can only occur on television

6. Audience expectations of documentaries are of educational films: their actual experiences of them are of gripping narratives.
7. After seeing a documentary in the cinema, between 80 and 90% of our respondents wanted to see more. (Hardie 2007)

Of particular interest here is that subject matter is a key element in determining the interest of documentary audiences. Their existing interest in the subject seems to be key to the composition of the mountain film audience.

Hill has focussed on how these particular audiences interests are determined by their past experience of documentary in the genre:

“Programme makers draw on production traditions, referring to previous practices to construct a documentary similar to another type of documentary; and audiences draw on their knowledge of previous documentary to recognise it as a distinctive genre.” (Hill 2008, pp217-218)

Again we see the resonance with the definitions of genre dealt with in the previous chapter. Hill’s research is probably the most comprehensive study on audience and documentary consisting of audience sampling of 4516 television documentary viewers. Hill goes on to argue that not only is audience experience predicated by their experience of other documentary but that the audience has collated genre perception from outside the documentary context:

“We can apply the idea of immersive and reflexive modes of engagement to watching documentary. Prior to the experience of watching documentary, we have already collected generic material that will become part of how we experience a particular programme.” (Hill 2008, p226)

These genre perceptions are of course reinforced by the industry as Hill observes :  
 “Genre expectations are dependent on production contexts.” (Hill 2008, p229)

So just what are the unique viewing perspectives we might find in the mountain film audience?

### **A Unique Viewing Perspective. Audience and Adventure Film.**

Gilchrist in his summary of the *Old Man of Hoy* suggests that one of the unique

aspects of mountain film is the awareness on behalf of the audience that they are not only witnessing a dangerous activity but that those who are filming on their behalf are also exposed to similar risk. This serves to enhance the vicarious experience: "The audience would be treated to 'fireside mountaineering' and 'carpet slippers climbing' by having dramatic pictures of a potentially deadly outdoor venture beamed into the comfort of their own home." (Gilchrist 2007, p48)

The danger to crew (alluded to by Gilchrist) has been analysed in relation to news and war documentary:

"The cameraman himself is in the dangerous situation we see in his shot and is by no means certain he will survive the birth of his picture ... It is this tangible being-present that gives the documentary the peculiar tension no other art can produce." (Balazs 1970, pp 170-171)

We see here an allusion to the specific tension engendered by the audience's awareness that the camera is present in the dangerous location – both these factors, the danger to the protagonists and the jeopardy faced by crew are essential components of successful adventure sport filming.

Daniel Barratt comments on the effect of this proximity of camera and protagonist in *Touching the Void*: "not only do we see the climber's arms straining to hold onto the overhang from close up; we are also presented with the vertiginous view from the top of the cliff." (Barratt 2006)

Barratt further identifies that this is a key factor for the armchair viewer, as it gives the audience a sufficiently intimate relationship with the action but allows for their actual physical remove: "'Fortunately, it's not you up there!' ... the end-result is a deeply harrowing, though ultimately vicarious, emotional experience." (Barratt 2006)

Stanley Kaufman writing in the *New Republic* in an analysis of *Touching the Void* further develops an argument that this dramatic engagement with the climbers actually extends in the mind of the audience to an engagement with the crew: "I kept wondering not so much about the actors who were playing Simpson and Yates but about the cameramen who were photographing them on that icy face, possibly suspended while they were doing it." (Kauffmann 2004).

We see here a further re-iteration of Hattum's viewpoint that expert crews and their acknowledged presence are part of the audience experience in viewing adventure sport documentary.

Salkeld identifies a similar connection between camera and alpinist in *Nordwand* (2008), a re-creation of the 1936 attempt on the Eiger's unclimbed North Face, an attempt that ultimately resulted in the death of all four of the climbing team. The feeling of proximity was actively pursued by the cinematographer Kolja Brandt:

"You have the feeling that the camera is climbing along with the alpinists ... It was that sense of being embedded, almost like a war photographer in the middle of the troops that he [Brandt] wanted to achieve in the film." (Salkeld 2008)

### **Specific Audience Motivations**

It has been argued that some of the motivation of the audience is spurred by the chance that through the act of watching adventure film the audience have the chance of experiencing death in a very real way. In *Death as Recreation, Armchair Mountaineering* (1984) JA Walter has explored this notion in relation to those who both read mountaineering literature and watch mountaineering films. Walter posits that the 'editing' of death from daily life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has lead to a kind of death pornography. Documentary portrayal of death in adventure film is unique, argues Walter, due to the development of a relationship during filming - loss is shared with the audience in a way that is normally only possible in fiction: "Mountaineering films can provide a peep into the reality, immediacy and humaneness of death; the viewer is gently lead through a sequence of before, during and after." (Walter 1984, p68).

The one step of removal provided for by the documentary camera allows the viewer access to the romantic notion of the sublime; as defined by Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise:

"When danger or pain press too nearly they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances and with certain modifications, they maybe and they are delightful ... Whatever excites this delight I call sublime." (Burke 1958, p14).

Walter continues on to analyse the techniques applied to engender this state in the viewer and observes that these are purposefully designed to induce fear in the viewer. Conversely he argues that in fact the protagonists are too actively involved and captivated by the activity to have time to feel fear. This absorption in the moment, the pure clear focus given by the activity, is often cited as one of extreme sport's key attractions by participants (Puchan 2005, p172). Given the intensity of this focus Walter argues that the viewer is left "far more obsessed with death than the participant." (Walter 1984, p75). This dichotomy between participant and audience motivation is a unique aspect of the genre.

Echoing Walter's argument is Stanley Kauffmann. He is clear in his conclusion as to what the audience's motivation is in watching *Touching the Void*: "Death is what we are watching for." Kauffmann (2004).

### ***Touching the Void* – A case study**

*Touching the Void* is an adaptation of Joe Simpson's book of the same name that recounted a 1985 expedition to the west face of Siula Grande an unclimbed route in the Peruvian Andes. Simpson along with partner Simon Yates were successful in their climb but on the descent Simpson fell badly breaking a leg. In the subsequent rescue Yates, in a blizzard, lowers Simpson over a serac and with his anchor failing elects to cut the rope. Simpson survives the fall into a crevasse and, left for dead by Yates, crawls three days back to their base camp arriving just as Yates was preparing to leave. The book had sold 500,000 copies. The film was directed by Kevin Macdonald, who had won a Best Documentary Oscar in 1999 for *One day in September*. *Touching the Void* went on to gross nearly \$10 million at the box office and won a BAFTA award for best picture.

Thomas Austin's examination of *Touching the Void* in *Watching the World. Screen Documentary and Audiences* "explores the appeal of the endangerment/survival at the centre of the film" (Austin 2007, p60). It provides an in depth analysis of audience reaction to a film within the mountain film genre and as such is worthy of further attention here.

Austin's audience research attempted to establish how viewers reacted to aesthetic aspects of *Touching the Void*. He was particularly interested in the way interview was blended with dramatic reconstruction within the film, how the audience coped with these modality shifts and what implications these shifts have in terms of the viewer's

investment in character and story. His research further attempted to trace “a mode of engagement which treated *Touching the Void* as an ‘inspirational’ story of (male) suffering and survival which might carry lessons for everyday life.” (Austin 2007, p60). *Touching the Void*’s story structure certainly fits the classic hero quest formula as the producer John Smithson observed: “*Touching the Void* was not [just] about mountain climbing ... the themes were friendship, they were about your reaction to danger, your will to survive, these are universal things.” (Austin and De Jong 2008, p173)

Interestingly *Touching the Void* was not marketed as a documentary but as “A true story - Beyond anything you could dare to invent.” The label ‘documentary’ was deliberately avoided. This deliberately played upon the concept of “indexing” - the idea that “We typically view a film while knowing it has been indexed, either as fiction or nonfiction. The particular indexing of a film mobilizes expectations and activities on the part of the viewer.” (Plantinga 1996, pp310-11). By avoiding the documentary ‘index’ (and its associated expectations – dull and worthy!) it was hoped the viewer would be more open to buying into the strength of the narrative provided by the dramatised reconstructions. The tag-line of the documentary was “What would you do to survive?” in Austin’s study this “proposed mode of response based on imagining oneself in Simpson’s perilous situation was ultimately taken up by several respondents.” (Austin 2007, p63) We see here a narrative technique used to heighten the vicarious experience.

*Touching the Void* uses interviews intercut with dramatised reconstruction. The interviews were shot using an Interratron – a device developed by Errol Morris so that interview subjects can look direct at an interviewer but appear to be looking straight to camera. The use of this technique allowed the interview segments to supply psychological depth to the reconstructed sequences. The dramatised climbing sequences offer “the familiar hooks of narrative action and engagement with character.” (Austin 2007, p60)

The challenge for Macdonald was to give veracity to these reconstructions to balance the interview with the drama:

“The answer we came up with was ... Keep the documentary element (the interviews) straightforward and then make the dramatic elements feel as real as possible, filming in a naturalistic style with good actors and no apologies.” (Austin 2007, p64)

In other words they shot in the classic style of adventure filmmaking. Audience reaction canvassed by Austin would indicate this was successful, a typical response: "it allowed the film to be both poetical and down to earth." (Austin 2007, p65)

Austin observes that the fact that respondents identified the film as of documentary status and that this was important in enhancing the vicarious experience:

*"Q9 How important to your enjoyment was the fact that the film is documentary?"*

*'It made all the difference. It's only in a true story that we can immerse ourselves fully in events shown on screen'."*

*"Respondents 'shared the experience' most notably via vicarious emotional upheavals, pain and ultimate survival ... 'Every stumble was agonising and I felt physically chilled that the conditions they filmed in were so horrendous'."*

*(Austin 2007, p65)*

This provides us with a prime example of how the awareness of the film crew's precarious position added to the dramatic tension of the documentary.

Similar to Walter, Austin found that viewer reaction was at once intensely vicarious but at the same time the viewer maintained the realisation that this is an activity far removed from the viewer's experience: "Amazement and wonder – the glorious mountains; the extraordinary power of human spirit and survival instinct; incredulity – why does anyone want to do it ... ?" (Austin 2007, p72)

This dichotomy in viewer response emerged as a pattern in Austin's survey, the ability for the film to attract and engage the viewer without them actual having to identify with the characters.

*"What were your responses to Touching the Void?"*

*Enjoyed it. Felt physically and emotionally exhausted afterwards, as if I had been through the experience as well.*

*Who did you identify with when watching the film?*

*No-one – I wouldn't put myself in that kind of danger."* (Austin 2007, p73)



I have observed a similar audience reaction to *Solo* where - as much as an audience engages with the plight of Andrew McCauley and his doomed kayaking mission – they cannot imagine themselves taking these risks.

Austin surmises that this engagement/differentiation in the viewer/protagonist relationship is heightened by a film's documentary status:

"The viewer felt a degree of engagement with Simpson when watching his ordeal but that these processes of engagement did not override an awareness of self that which emphasised the difference between [the viewer] and the climbers ... it is possible that such an assertion of difference between the viewing self and persons represented on screen may be more likely or stronger when the film being watched is a documentary rather than a fiction film." (Austin 2007, p74)

These examples highlight the subtleties in the nature of mountain film spectatorship.

Austin in his conclusion nicely summarises the particular viewer experience of *Touching the Void*:

"With its clearly signalled combination of two distinct formal modes, *Touching The Void* seems to have largely avoided the problems of critical and audience reception ... Viewer investments in its re-enacted narrative appear to have been strengthened by the verifying function of the accompanying interview material." (Austin 2007, p79)

Austin is talking here of the blend of dramatic reconstruction and interview in *Touching the Void*. It seems that the extensive use of the blend of 'live' action intercut with interview that can be observed in mountain film is re-enforcing the viewer experience in a similar manner.

This chapter has examined the relationship between viewer and film within the context of documentary as a whole and then specifically within the context of mountain film. The following chapter examines some of the ethical questions that arise in the creation of films in a risky environment as well as considering some of the ethical responsibilities that filmmakers may have towards their audience.

## Chapter Five:

### Ethical Issues in Adventure Film

Mountain and adventure filmmaking, in its engagement with risk, necessitates a parallel engagement in the ethical issues that the filmmaker faces. What are the filmmaker's responsibilities to their subjects, their crews and their audience within this environment? Where lies the ethical boundary?

"The producer, Alan Chivers, declared it to be 'the diciest outside broadcast I've attempted', a sentiment shared with Aubrey Singer, head of television outside broadcasts, feature and science programmes at the BBC, who wrote to Chivers two weeks before the climb asking him to 'make a point of briefing all your climbers not to take unnecessary risks just because they are on television'... by pursuing entertainment values, climbers were experiencing a loss of control in a sport where managing risk is the difference between life and death" (Gilchrist 2007, pp51-52)

### Film-making in an environment of risk.

In a clip from Kevin Macdonald's *Return to Siula Grande* (2004) (essentially a 'making of' *Touching the Void*) Joe Simpson, watching two professional climbers departing to stage a re-creation of his climb, comments to the camera, "it would be bloody ironic if someone was killed making a recreation of an accident I survived."

It is a fine line in adventure film between the successful completion of the epic quest and the failure (and potential death) of the protagonists.

The performers' awareness of the need for performance has given rise to the expression 'Kodak courage' whereby performers for the camera undertake feats of danger they might not normally have undertaken in the hope of cinematic immortality. (Kay and Laberge p9). This is also observed by Gilchrist when he comments on a climber's willingness to perform a dangerous sunset abseil for the camera, a descent that the other climbers "preferring caution to spectacle" elect not to do (Gilchrist 2007, p55). The ethical question raised here is whether the camera's presence may contribute to the injury or even death of the participants. This ethical dilemma can be seen across a wide

range of extreme sport filmmaking – what are the responsibilities of the filmmaker and audience when through their desire to vicariously experience extreme sport, participants experience the very real consequences of injury and death?

Beyond even the voyeurism of ‘regular’ adventure documentary there seems to be a developing sub-genre of protagonists filming themselves pushing the limits of solo adventure seen in Jon Muir’s *Alone Across Australia* 2003 and *Solo* 2008. This is alluded to in a review of *Solo*: “This seems like a growing trend: People who intentionally film themselves doing apparently crazy things because they want to tell their stories later, even if those stories have unintended outcomes.” (Dehnart 2008). In *Solo* of course the unintended outcome was the death of the protagonist Andrew McAuley. Recent films like *Solo* and *Grizzly Man* (dir Werner Herzog 2005) seem to have pushed a boundary whereby the posthumous direct-to-camera revelations of the protagonist question the audience’s motivation for viewing. Is this just the modern day equivalent of the public execution? The directors of *Solo* chose not to screen the final recovered tapes rescued from McAuley’s kayak but still screened the following excerpt: “I’m really worried that I’m not going to see my wife again, or my little boy, and I’m very scared, I’m wondering why I’m doing this, I really am. And I don’t have an answer.”

Ironically if one of the aims of adventure documentary is to provide insight into the motivation of the protagonist then *Solo* does nothing to further this aim, the audience probably is no wiser as to what motivates men like McAuley to take on such challenges. In fact it could be argued we are merely witnessing the psychological break up of our central character. Similarly in his review of *Big River Man* (2008), Pulver (2009) poses the question: “is someone experiencing psychological breakdown a fit subject for entertainment?”

Peter Mortimer director of the National Geographic Channel’s First Ascent series in a discussion of ethics of filming climbers soloing (climbing unroped) defends the suggestion that it is “irresponsible to be broadcasting this to the masses” – he argues that the risks of the activity are outweighed by the beauty of the action and the display of human potential that is unveiled. But the most compelling image of his film *Alone on The Wall* is not Alex Honnold climbing unroped and effortlessly up the North West face of Half Dome but when he has a moment of crisis and stands “gripped” on a tiny ledge

halfway up. What would have been the ethics of filming if at this point the climber had fallen? Would Mortimer have used such footage and on what grounds?

### **Filming of death.**

The filming of death in documentary has received a good deal of critical attention. As early as 1945 Bela Balazs writes in *The Theory of Film* of the impact of placing the camera in close proximity to real death: "The significance of such shots lies not in the death-despising courage to which they bare witness ... what is new and different here is that these cameramen look death in the face through the lens of a movie picture camera." (Balazs 1970)

Sobchack observes that this proximity to death creates a peculiar impact on the documentary maker: "Witnessing the act of dying, which in the fictional film can only be mimicked, places an acute emotional and ethical strain on the documentary filmmaker." (Sobchack 1984, p82) Sobchack developed the theory that it is the nature of the 'Documentary Gaze' that ethically justifies the filming of death. Bill Nichols went onto define six gazes that permit the filmmaker to record death: accidental, helpless, endangered, interventional, humane and clinical-professional (from Nichols 2001, pp80-84). It is the endangered gaze that justifies the filming of death in the adventure film context due to the camera operator taking on heightened risk of death himself – this idea which was developed with the idea of the war documentarian in mind particularly also applies to adventure film.

Not all adventure film, however, endangers the operator - yet the genre seems to have claimed an ethical right to film death - be it in recording the final fall of a base jumper in *Risk* (dir James Heyward 1996) or in footage of a body recovery from a climbing accident in *Mountain Rescuers* (prod John Hyde, 2006). Does the genre contain within its ethical brief an implicit permission to film death and is this accepted as such by its audience? It can be argued that this is the case as there has been the recording of death throughout the history of the adventure film and audiences seem to have accepted this inherent in the genre's close relationship with risk.

These ethical boundaries are further expanded in the recent trend of the posthumous documentary, for example Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* and in *Solo*: "the project of attempted retrieval brings particular formal and ethical dilemmas when a documentary

deploys and re-contextualizes material by a now dead protagonist.” (Austin 2004). This model whereby the filmmaker/protagonist dies but footage is recovered and made into documentary recalls Balazs’ observation of the death of a cameraman in a war documentary: “...the camera was overturned and the cameraman killed, while the automatic mechanism ran on ... it is a new form of consciousness that was born out of the union of man and camera.” (Balazs 1970)

It is this similar ‘new consciousness’ that we see in the use of recovered footage shot in both *Solo* and *Grizzly Man* – the filmmaker has been killed but the camera rolls on. This may prove to be a continuing trend within the genre and raises ethical questions for both viewer and producer. Serge Daney notes:

“The trip switch is therefore the death of the filmmaker. Pushed to the very limit, the filmmaker, it seems, must die with his camera in hand. In its more anodyne guise, this is also the fetishism of ‘filming as decisive moment’, of filming as risk, and of risk as what justifies the making of the film, conferring on it a certain surplus value.” (Daney 2003, p37)

The relationship between the filmmaker and the proximity of death adds value to a project.

Thomas Austin in relation to *Touching The Void* observes this film avoids the usual documentary dilemma (codified in Nichols’ concept of camera ‘gaze’) by the use of dramatised reconstruction:

“... the camera, and thus the audience, can gain access to a ‘good view’ of the climb and its crises without having to confront the moral dilemma of how to respond to the endangerment being witnessed... It may be the case then that audience awareness of the reconstructed nature of the events depicted effectively pre-empts or allays any possible guilt in witnessing the crisis moments and pain endured on the mountain.” (Austin 2007, p76)

## **Broader ethical issues.**

Mountain film provides an interesting vehicle by which to explore some of the broader ethical issues being faced by documentary as a whole, these can be seen in an

exploration of the ethical relationship that exists between documentarian and the audience in respect to the 'truth' being conveyed. There are many examples in mountain film where dramatic reconstruction has been utilised due to the difficulty of accessing of location and in the retelling of historical events. As discussed earlier, *Touching The Void* provides an example of this, other recent films include *Dying For Everest* (dir Dick Denniston 2006) and *Miracle on Everest* (dir Jen Peedom 2008). The television series *I Shouldn't Be Alive* (Darlow Smithson) fully re-creates survival stories including many that are mountain or adventure themed. The feature film *Nord Wand Nordwand* (dir Phillip Stozl) was presented as docu-drama re-creating an early unsuccessful attempt on the Eiger's North Face.

In examining the ethics of the use of dramatised re-construction it seems that it is ethically admissible if clearly signposted. In *Touching the Void* for example all the climbing action is re-creation there was a conscious decision not to mix any 'real' footage with reconstruction. The fact that there was no 'real' footage simplified this decision-making process; producer John Smithson:

"I believe when you're telling a story, you should use whatever means at your disposal to best involve your audience in that story, and if that's re-enactment then use it. But only if there is justification for using it." (Austin and de Jong, 2008, p164)

Paul Ward has explored this terrain paying particular attention to the balance between documentary impulse and the maximisation of dramatic tension:

"The relationship between drama, documentary and performance at first seems seductively straightforward. Some films employ actors to play the roles of real people in various kinds of dramatic reconstruction of real events: such drama-documentaries therefore contain *performances* ...they are constructed to capitalise on the intensity of *dramatic* scenarios, and these two elements qualify to modify the *documentary* impulse of the films." (Ward 2008, p191)

In both *Dying For Everest* and *Miracle on Everest* reconstructed footage is cut within footage shot on Mt Everest – stylistically the audience is given no clues as to differentiate between the real and the reconstructed. Does this break an ethical contract between filmmaker and audience?



Film crew reconstructing Everest scenes at the Remarkables (Barnard photo)

As Ward observes ethical questions arise when archive footage “is made to perform” ie edited for dramatic purposes: “Notions of performance in documentary are therefore potentially controversial ... and are deemed to be a central problematic for a film’s documentary status or credentials.” (Ward 2008, p193)

Once a film is identified as being documentary the audience feels they are buying into a clear picture of what is real and what not:

“Questions of performance and not knowing exactly when someone is ‘being themselves’ are commonplace in criticism of documentary films ...

Documentaries tell the truth, drama and performance is make believe: to combine the two is ethically suspect.” (Ward 2008, pp193-4)

The blurring of the line between reconstruction and reality poses an ethical dilemma – similarly the manipulation of the timeline of a film can also betray the contract of truth between documentarian and audience.

In the directors’ commentary to *Solo*, co-directors Jen Peedom and David Michod reveal that recovered footage of Andrew McAuley - that in the film plays as if it was from after the final storm to hit his kayak - was in fact shot much earlier in the trip. The audience is manipulated into believing that this is footage shot just prior to McAuley’s death when in reality it is not. The footage is real but the manipulation of the timeframe raises the question as to whether this is ethically dubious.

One last point regarding ethics arises from Thomas Austin's survey of viewer response to *Touching The Void*. Some of Austin's respondents question Macdonald's ethics in pushing his protagonists (particularly Yates) in his questioning and in his method of framing questions: "I think he [Yates] was justifiably in being annoyed by the nature of Macdonald's questions ... He [Macdonald] seemed to have preconceived idea of the reaction he wanted ..." (Austin 2007, pp77-78)

In documentary that contains sensitive material common adventure film, particularly in respect of death and endangerment, it seems that the audience expects ethical treatment of their subjects from directors and producers.

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## Chapter Six: Producing a film within the Genre.

### *In the Shadow of the Mountain.*

*In The Shadow of the Mountain* is a half-hour documentary that charts one climber's exploration of the motivations of climbers; why they take the risks they do in the pursuit of their sport.

The climber is myself, a mountain guide and filmmaker from Wanaka New Zealand. Prompted by the death of a climbing friend I set out on a journey to discover just what it is that drives my friends to climb. My quest leads me on a mountaineering trip with Everest climbers Lydia Bradey and Dean Staples, ice-climbing on frozen waterfalls in the far south of New Zealand and on an introspective journey that questions my own and other climbers' attitudes to risk.

Through a series of interviews with leading climbers the film reveals an insight into just what drives climbers to face the dangers of the mountain environment and investigates what they perceive the rewards of this experience are. It also looks at how climbers deal with the realisation that their sport has killed many of their close friends.

The scientific basis of the film is explored through a series of interviews with Christchurch psychiatrist and climber Dr Erik Monasterio who has conducted clinical analysis on the character and personality types of climbers and whose conclusions provide some idea as to the real motivations of climbers.

The film features footage of climbs from New Zealand's Southern Alps. Extensive use of POV photography enhances this insight into the climbing experience for the non-climbing viewer. Time lapse, aerial and long duration scenic shots allow space for the viewer to fully inhabit the landscape of the film. An original musical score and use of interview grabs over the climbing sequences personalises and intensifies the viewing experience.

### *In The Shadow of the Mountain - A genre piece*

In the production of *In The Shadow of the Mountain* we were conscious of the genre expectation of our potential audience. Beyond the initial screening to a broad premiere audience we envisaged the audience to be primarily those who attend mountain film

festivals. With this in mind we were aware of conveying our story using the language and tools of the genre.

*In The Shadow of the Mountain* incorporates many of the technical characteristics I have identified in Mountain Film. The opening montage commences with a long helicopter shot tracking of the main divide of the Southern Alps – this dissolves into a tilt down on to two climbers working their way along a knife-edge icy ridge. The shots work together to place the climbers in the context of the landscape. Throughout the film zoom shots in and out seek to establish the climbers in this broader and challenging environment.

Other shots characteristic of the genre included frequent use of POV helmet cameras to enmesh the viewer in the climbers' experience. Crane shots were utilised in both rock and ice-climbing sequences; again the function was to bring the viewer into a more vicarious experience. Similarly, extreme close ups were utilised of ice axes and feet hitting snow and ice. These were cut with wide shots from above the climbers to convey the physicality of the action while revealing the steepness of the terrain it occurred within.

Reaction to the film seemed to confirm some of the theories explored in this thesis. For example, the awareness that the cameraman must have been in similarly precarious positions to the protagonists seemed to heighten the vicarious experience for many viewers; many asked the question "How on earth did you get that shot?"

The closing shot of the film is a long slow extended pan across the summit ridge of Mt Sefton. This shot is a direct reference to the opening shot in Werner Herzog's *Dark Glow of the Mountains* – a similar pan of the summit ridges of the Gasherbrum Range in Pakistan. The slow pan gives the audience time to contemplate the film and the harsh and jagged nature of the ridgeline serves as a counterpoint to the human themes the film has explored. As Watson observes of the Herzog shot: "Its emotional impact comes from its hint or indication of the difficulty, the danger, and the duration of the endeavour." (Watson 1992, p175)

In the making of *In The Shadow of the Mountain* we confronted some of the ethical questions inherent in the genre. Two shooting trips were organised in the mountains and in the climbs undertaken there were elements of risk involved. As Joe Simpson commented in *Return To Siula Grande* it would be ironic if an accident happened in a film about climbing and risk. We actively avoided placing any pressure on participants

in the film to perform tasks they were not happy with and climbing options were discussed in advance to maintain a balance between our filming needs and safety. As the producer of the film was also the camera operator there was no ethical dilemma for the producer in placing crew in danger.

Our intention is to distribute the film by initially pitching it to the appropriate festivals in the hope it will attract interest from a distributor. We intend to convey our marketing pitch within the language of the genre. We have promoted the narrative as a “journey” and a “quest,” and we have stressed that the camera “brings the audience along for the ride.”

The relationship between the creative component of this thesis and the written component has been important. The awareness of the history and genre characteristics of mountain film informed the production of a film within the genre.

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## Chapter Seven:

### Mountain Film As A Vehicle For Science Communication.

There is a recent trend for filmmakers within the genre to attempt to use the audience's attraction to adventure film to communicate wider scientific themes - particularly on environmental issues. Films such as *Last Paradise* (dir Clive Neeson 2010) and *Himalaya Alert* (dir Mark Verkerk 2010) overtly utilise adventure film as a vehicle to convey strong scientific messages.

The intent of this chapter is not to enter into an examination of the field of science communication but rather to examine within certain adventure films how the entertainment value of the films are utilised to further an awareness of science. Mountain film with its intense relationship to the natural environment and with its strong story structure may be an effective tool for highlighting scientific issues to a broader audience than those who traditionally view science programming. Amy Hardie's research has shown that viewers of documentary largely make their viewing choices on the basis of subject (Hardie 2008). Her research makes it clear why science communicators may seek to 'piggyback' on other documentary genres to broaden their audience appeal.

A good example of a cross-genre attempt to broaden audience is seen in *Last Paradise*, Clive Neeson's documentary of the history of extreme sports in New Zealand. *Last Paradise* is pitched firmly in the realm of adventure film – its tagline reads "A 45 year quest for adrenaline and paradise." Reactions to the film have been expressed in the language we would anticipate: "Rugged wilderness and untouched landscapes are revealed through Neeson's critically acclaimed photography and cinematography... many times sacrificing his safety to get 'the shot'." (Berman 2010)

But while Neeson's footage and techniques are firmly established in the adventure film genre, his principal motivation lies in science education:

"The purpose of the movie is to educate on science and innovation. To recruit the younger generation back into science and make it cool again, because it's through science we will find painless solutions to the problems we face in the world."

(Kara, 2010)

In an interview with the director I questioned Neeson as to how aware he was of the manipulation of genre expectation. He responded that the film was a conscious attempt at a:

“re-definition of documentary, creating a whole new genre using the vehicle of the adrenaline filmmaking of action sports to address the great issues being faced by the world - environmentally, sociologically, and scientifically.”<sup>3</sup>

A physicist, Neeson uses adventure elements to initially highlight the changes to the environment that he has observed in his lifetime. Re-mastered footage from the 1977 hang-gliding and ski film *Off The Edge* is cut against contemporary footage of the Tasman Glacier (New Zealand’s largest and most rapidly declining) – the action footage segues into a ‘now and then’ comparison of this glacial recession. Interviews with glaciologists then frame these observations in terms of the impact of global warming. After setting up this progression Neeson further develops the narrative to a discussion of alternative fuels and the possible advantages of nuclear fusion. Neeson sees his whole film as an attempt to re-ignite an appreciation of the natural environment within the viewer. His warning is explicit: “if we continue in the downward spiral of isolating children from the wilderness there will be a consequence in future attitudes to the environment.”

Adventure film has been used as a vehicle for heightening awareness of environmental issues by other filmmakers. Jon Muir whose film *Alone Across Australia*, follows his solo and unsupported trek across the Australian interior commented that one of his principle motivations was to make ordinary Australians aware of the fragility of the environment of the interior.<sup>4</sup> Similarly Dutch filmmaker Mark Verkerk follows journalist Bernice Notenboom on an expedition to Mt Everest in order to highlight concern on the dwindling glaciers of the Himalaya and the potential impact this could have on water supply to Asia. Throughout the film climbing footage is intercut with interviews and graphics that highlight the scientific themes.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted by the author in Dunedin. September 3, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Phone interview. June 12, 2010.

An ascent of Mt Everest as a means to convey scientific information has been used by other filmmakers. The Discovery Channel series *Everest The Deadliest Summit* (2008) followed an expedition's attempt to summit Everest while including some of the science of what was going on. Segments of the programme used graphics and interviews on subjects including geology, altitude sickness and the depletion of oxygen at altitude. Climber's breathing and heart rates were monitored and this information was integrated into climbing sequences.

These examples may reflect a trend within mountain and adventure filmmaking; an attempt to incorporate more than just vicarious entertainment in the genre. If we look at the language the industry is using in its self-promotion we can see evidence of this appeal to larger ideas to promote the genre. National Geographic's adventure channel has the tag line "Inspiring people to care about the planet." Current festival advertising provides another example; on the website of Telluride Mountainfilm Festival the following banner is used: "Mountainfilm is life-changing. It challenges, educates and inspires us to be the kind of caring and committed global citizens we should be." Jeff Hauser, Raynier Institute.

There seems to be a growing trend within the genre to align itself with some of the 'worthier' aspirations of the genres of environmental and science documentary. How adventure film audiences will respond to these shifts remains to be seen.

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## Chapter Eight: Conclusion

If an interested movie-goer enquired as to whether there was any mountain or adventure documentary being screened it would be possible to provide an answer, most students of film could point the interested party to an upcoming film festival or maybe to a copy of *Touching the Void*. There is recognition within the film world that there is an existing genre of such film and that there is an active distribution network to connect this film to an interested viewer.

This thesis has sought to look closer at just what constitutes Mountain or Adventure Film. I have examined the genesis, development and continued re-definition of the genre. By collating here a précis of critical writing on the genre I hope that this thesis may prove to be a useful resource for future academic study. As documentary continues to develop, and as definitions of what constitutes documentary morph within this development, it is inevitable that critical attention will be drawn to concepts of genre. Genre studies enable us not just to classify the boundaries of documentary as a whole but of sub-genre within the documentary pantheon.

As discussed in the thesis, academic attention has recently been turned to audience perceptions of documentary. Further research into issues of spectatorship will provide clearer insights into how audiences interact with documentary film. Empirical audience research will help to answer some key questions:

1. What motivates viewers to choose one genre of film over another?
2. What kind of experience does the audience have when interacting with a particular genre of documentary?
3. What does the audience demand of documentary in terms of the balance of 'truth' and entertainment?

This kind of research lies outside the scope of this thesis but through the detailed examination of the mountain and adventure film genre provided here it would be possible to develop a genre-based approach as a tool on which to base further research. In this thesis I have established that there is a link between the viewing position of the

audience and the history and recognisable characteristics of the genre. It would be interesting to see further research to establish similar links in other documentary genres.

Beyond the academic field there may be practical applications for filmmakers. Knowledge of audience motivations is a key consideration when developing a production. Buying into a certain genre as a filmmaker carries story and technical implications that the audience will be anticipating – these may be adhered to or ignored but the awareness of their existence allows the filmmaker to make informed decisions as to content, narrative and cinematography. This knowledge of the history and characteristics of mountain film informed the filmmaking process in producing a film within the genre – *In The Shadow of The Mountain*, the creative component to this thesis.

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## Filmography:

*A Boat Leaving the Harbour* (1896). Lumiere Brothers. Dir Louis Lumiere.

*Alone Across Australia* (2003). Shark Island. Dir Jon Muir.

*Alone on the Wall* (2010). First Ascent/Nat Geo Films. Dir Peter Mortimer.

*Ascent of the Matterhorn* (1913). British and Colonial. Dir Frank Burlingham.

*Big River Man* (2008). Big River Man LLC. Dir John Maringouin.

*Dying For Everest* (2006). Making Movies. Dir Richard Denniston.

*Everest The Deadliest Summit* (2008). Discovery Channel.

*Frank Hurley - The Man Who Made History* (2004). BBC Four / ABC. Dir Simon Nasht.

*Grizzly Man* (2005). Discovery Docs/Lions gate. Dir Werner Herzog.

*Himalaya Alert* (2010). EMS. Dir Mark Verkerk.

*In the Grip of the Polar Pack Ice* (1919). Ralph Minden Film. Dir Frank Hurley.

*In The Shadow of the Mountain* (2010). Dir / prod Max Segal and Hugh Barnard.

*Kampf um den Himalaja* (1938). Tobis-Melofilm GmbH. Dir Frank Leberecht.

*Kon Tiki* (1951). Art-Film. Dir Thor Heyerdahl.

*Last Paradise* 2010. Neeson. Dir Clive Neeson.

*Mont Blanc Speed Flying* (2008). Lafond. Dir Didier Lafond.

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*Nanga Parbat* (1936). Tobis-Melofilm GmbH. Dir Frank Leberecht.

*Nanook of the North* (1922). Revillion Freres. Dir Robert Flaherty.

*90°South: With Scott to the Antarctic* (1933). British Film Institute. Dir Herbert Ponting.

*Nordwand* (2008). Dor Film-West. Dir Phillip Stoltz.

*On the Rock Face* (1980). BBC. Dir Ron Padula.

*Return To Siula Grande* (2003). Film Four. Dir Kevin Macdonald.

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*South: Ernest Shackleton and the Endurance Expedition* (1919). Milestone Film and Video. Dir Frank Hurley.

*Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure* (2001). White Mountain Films and NOVA/WGBH. Dir George Butler.

*Sir Ross Smith's Flight from England to Australia* (1920). Ralph Minden Film. Dir Frank Hurley.

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*The Conquest of Everest* (1953). Countryman Films. Dir George Lowe.

*The Dark Glow of The Mountains* (1984). Werner Herzog Produktions. Dir Werner Herzog.

*The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (2001). Cowboy Booking International. Dir George Butler.

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*The Great White Silence* (1913). Gaumont. Dir Herbert Ponting.

*The Home of the Blizzard* (1913). Ralph Minden Film. Dir Frank Hurley.

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*The 1975 British Annapurna Expedition*. BBC.

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