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Touching the Void in Our Lives

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In the first act of Othello, the Moor tells Desdemona's father how he won her heart by regaling her with stories of his thrilling adventures -- of "most disastrous chances,/Of moving accidents by flood and field;/Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach."

Desdemona quickly came to love him "for the dangers [he] had pass'd," and she's not alone in her appetite for tales of marvelous survival feats. These days, though, we prefer our adventure stories -- like everything else, it seems -- to be excessive and overblown, equivalent to the gluttonous "Extreme Gulp" soft drink you can purchase at a nearby convenience store. Brave as they were, the exploits undergone by many adventurers of Othello's caliber -- Lawrence of Arabia, Sir Edmund Hillary, and so on -- were often recounted in their own day with a sense of dignity, even modesty. Those qualities have now been replaced by the extremer-than-thou braggadocio of this month's ESPN-broadcast X Games X.

In today's popular culture, "extreme" is the new mundane. It's everywhere -- from Extreme History With Roger Daltrey on the History Channel to Weather Extreme on the Discovery Channel. There's a European cable venue called the Extreme Sports Network, ready for U.S. broadcasts as soon as the starting pistol sounds. And don't forget Extreme Make-over, the ABC series about the miracles of plastic surgery.

At the movies, this trend has taken the form of increasingly frequent releases about daredevil stunts, perilous near-disasters, and terrifying battles between humanity and the elements. The current spate started in 1998 with Everest, a documentary about scaling the mountain, narrated by Liam Neeson and shot in the

giant-screen IMAX process, itself a kind of extreme cinema. Soon came the 2000 documentary *Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition*, also narrated by the intrepid Neeson, and last year's docudrama *Touching the Void*, about two mountaineers' near-death experience while climbing a previously unscaled peak in the Peruvian Andes. Other recent arrivals include *Step Into Liquid* (2003), a documentary about surfing in every imaginable locale, and this summer's *Riding Giants*, another *Endless Summer* spinoff. *Open Water*, a reality-based story of two scuba divers abandoned in a shark-infested sea, opens this month.

On the fiction front, examples include the 2002 thriller *Extreme Ops*, pitting extreme-sports aficionados against terrorists, and the 2001 comedy *Extreme Days*, crossing the teen-pic genre with far-out skateboarding, snowboarding, and the like.

It's easy to dismiss such movies as superficial, audience-pleasing spectacle, but clearly more is going on here. The most resonant of these films take as their theme the resilience of the human spirit when faced with apparently imminent death.

Touching the Void, for instance, tells how the real-life climber Joe Simpson, left for dead in a mountain crevasse, made an unimaginably arduous trek toward his base camp -- sometimes delirious with pain from a broken leg -- without even knowing whether his companions would still be there to keep what was left of him alive. *Open Water* is less visually extravagant but similarly harrowing to watch, as two vacationing scuba divers discover their tourist group has returned to port without them, stranding them amid sharks, stingrays, agonizing thirst, and the hazards of hypothermia. Graeme Revell's music score offers a telling clue to the filmmakers' intentions -- combining a mysterious aura, suiting the uncertainty of the protagonists' fate, with a mystical one, suggesting that the direness of their state puts them into uncanny contact with some kind of "beyond" that necessarily is undefined.

The growing interest in films about extreme situations doesn't mean more of us are hang gliding, bungee jumping, or white-water rafting in our spare time. On the contrary, social-science experts tell us we compose a more passive and sedentary society than ever

before -- our labors easier, our dwellings more comfortable, our bodies more protected from war and pestilence thanks to designer weaponry and high-tech medicine. With the Internet letting us order everything from diapers to death certificates online, society's more privileged members now find the very notion of venturing into the outside world more an option than a necessity.

In films like *Open Water* and *Touching the Void* extreme perils are presented as both terrifying mishaps and opportunities for feats of bravery and control. What's missing from such movies are serious thoughts about the ethical questions they raise, some of which are vividly described by Jon Krakauer in his 1997 book *Into Thin Air*, about an ill-fated Mt. Everest expedition. There he argues that today's corporate-sponsored climbs are largely commercialized ventures available to anyone who comes up with the cash to pay for them, regularly leaving the slopes strewn with waste, refuse, even corpses. Krakauer tells of one climber who, unwilling to part with a laptop computer and espresso machine, was basically dragged up and down the mountain by Sherpa guides, the proficient locals who often pay the price for clients' ineptitude.

Many extreme adventurers describe their activities as attempts to give meaning to their directionless lives, to escape the numbing regularity of everyday routine, or to seek a sense of spiritual grace; and we duly sanction their willingness to jeopardize their lives (and the lives of others) in the name of a higher purpose. Yet people who take personal risks of a less spectacular, more unglamorous nature -- heavy smokers, for example, or those who sniff at the idea of exercise -- tend to receive the opposite treatment, portrayed as social outcasts in the entertainment media and scare-mongering specimens in medical journalism. And there's no cable channel called *Extreme Pariahs*.

Recognizing that double standard can help us understand the current appeal of outlandish sports and survival movies. Despite our cosseted lifestyles, after all, we're more obsessed by health concerns than ever before. We're commanded to scrutinize nutrition labels with Talmudic attention lest we fall prey to sugars, fats, cholesterol, or carbs. We're urged to avoid alcohol, swallow dietary supplements, filter our water, purify our air. Perhaps the

appeal of extreme sport and survival movies is linked to an implicit rejection of those imperatives -- to the thrill of watching people bolder than ourselves decide "to hell with it," throw off the shackles of their snug little lives, and assert the right to risk everything for no rational reason at all.

At least occasionally, we all feel a need to reclaim our heritage as sensation-seeking, risk-taking creatures -- vicariously if not in real, physical terms. Movies like *Touching the Void* and *Open Water* give us the best of both worlds: We get the thrilling frisson of watching others come face to face with death, plus the tut-tutting "I told you so" pleasure of seeing the foolhardy get their comeuppance. Extreme schadenfreude, perhaps?

And why not? Schadenfreude, in one form or another, helps turn the wheels of contemporary culture. What is the basis of capitalism but institutionalized schadenfreude, making money at the expense of others? What is the electoral system but the struggle to see one's own candidates succeed and (crucially) the others fail? What is the drawing power of spectator sports but the hope of watching "our" team win and (again, crucially) the other one lose?

If schadenfreude is the reason for our fascination with spectacles of the extreme, the sort of exploit favored by the late Graham Chapman of the Monty Python comedy troupe -- whose membership in the Dangerous Sports Club led him to downhill skiing in a Venetian gondola and hang gliding over an Ecuadorean volcano -- could become even more of an entertainment norm than it already is.

Or, conceivably, the pendulum may swing again, reviving the drowsy satisfactions of banality. What's on the Miniature Golf Channel tonight? How's that new IMAX movie about mowing the lawn?

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