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Toward Defining the Void

I have been asked to write a piece on the success of the film *Touching the Void*. It has proved far more challenging to write intelligently about this film's phenomenon than it is to write about climbing. Firstly, the success of the film has little to do with the fact that it is about climbing. Secondly, I have to be a little philosophical to reach this conclusion. The public success and fascination with the film stems from a deep-rooted need for adventure which is in fact a public reaction to – or more accurately, a public reaction against – a range of factors that shape the modern world: the deception of politics and advertising, the psychology of safety, spoon-feeding of entertainment, and just about everything else that takes the zest out of life and replaces it with someone else's product or spin.

Henry James described philosophy as 'that dogged struggle in the pursuit of clarity'. This wonderful little phrase seems a useful 'fits all sizes' description for a number of things at the moment. It describes this attempt to write an article about a film adapted from a book about a climbing adventure. Unlike climbing, however, this attempt may neither succeed nor fail – it may not even reach the base of its objective.

It occurs to me that climbing itself is largely a 'dogged struggle' and yet there are moments of supreme clarity. So much serious climbing is an almost inarticulate struggle, engaging us in a physical rather than a mental journey toward some revelation of 'clarity'. The metaphor holds in part because the physical struggle passes through landscapes as fantastic as any philosophical construct. It takes us towards a sort of personal and defining clarity that, no matter how short-lived, is very intense and 'real'. Anyone who has achieved a climb where the outcome (and life itself) was in doubt will know what that means. It is the moment Joe Simpson emerges from the crevasse – life itself is clarity, the struggle remains.

Climbing has spawned many other parallels with philosophy and the arts. It is clear to me, though, that the vitality of climbing, like philosophy, generates more questions and debate than it provides answers. And to be flippant, there is one huge difference between climbing and philosophy at the moment – there are no blockbuster films on the subject of philosophy. Perhaps the public are awakening to the fact that great adventure can be more stimulating than much that modern life advertises as 'great ideas'.

When word got round in 2002 that *Touching the Void* was going to be made into a film, most climbers slumped into their usual scepticism. Purists said leave the tale alone. How could a film re-create that state of personal

adventure experienced by just about everyone who read the book? Although the film was to be British made, we feared the sort of Hollywood reconstructions that in recent years have given us *Vertical Limits*, *K2* and *Cliff Hanger*. Hollywood can re-write anything, certainly British history. Apparently it was American brains that cracked the Enigma Code and soon it will be American wits and brawn that won the Battle of Britain.

And would the film even attempt to tell the true story? Everyone had heard of previous plans to cast Tom Cruise as Joe Simpson (the hero), while the baddy was to be given a motive for cutting the rope, perhaps as a means of removing the competition for the delectable girl waiting for Joe's return back in base camp. A string of abysmal 'climbing' films from Hollywood made us fear the worst.

On a different level, our romantic vision of the British tradition of mountaineering had also been rearranged by Americans. Those horrendous pictures of the destroyed body of George Leigh Mallory did irreparable damage to our vision of the man and his era. In that largely pre-commercial and amateur world, climbing had little purpose other than as part of a great game. Mallory was in a direct line back to the Romantic period when there had been a reaction against the restrictions and order of the Enlightenment. That romantic surge had produced such remarkable men and women as Whymper, Mummery and Fanny Bullock Workman. What is the 'romantic vision' of climbing? It is the instinctive recognition of the significance of any action for its own sake – of having the individualism, courage, imagination and will-power to do something stimulating yet dangerous, and defeat the odds for no ulterior reason.

Capturing that vision (with clarity!) is the magic ingredient of *Touching the Void*. It made the book an international bestseller. When Joe Simpson rejects God and his own hideous fate from the bottom of a crevasse, he evokes something far more powerful and individually spiritual – the life force that sustains him and drives him to survival. Perhaps this is the vital essence of everything 'spiritual'. The 'void', when touched, awakens a force which, whether you believe in God or a greater power or not, confirms one's mortality and spurs the will to live. That is why it can be defined as a spiritual essence – without it, we perish.

All this philosophising does not explain how you make a BAFTA-winning film. I've become familiar with the story because my co-director at the Kendal Mountain Film Festival is Brian Hall, whose company was brought in by the film-makers to co-ordinate safety and logistics on the mountain. It was a good start – the director and producer were employing and consulting climbers who were intimate with all the main ingredients required for a film of *Touching the Void* – the individuals involved, the mountains and mountain film-making. Ironically, it was Brian who had originally pointed Joe and Simon at the route (and it was me who provided the famous rope!)

It seemed that there was going to be a real attempt to be true to the book. Oscar-winning director, Kevin Macdonald, and visionary producer, John Smithson, were clear that an international bestselling book did not need enhancements, just true visualisation. They also went straight to the right people to act as their advisers – Joe and Simon – and pulled together an ‘on location’ logistics team headed up by Brian with Cubby Cuthbertson, Paul Moores, John Whittle, Rory Gregory and Martin Rhodes, an experienced crew who knew both the business of climbing and that of film making. Lead film man Mike Eley worked closely with another UK climbing filmmaker, Keith Partridge. The film editor was a New Zealander, Justine Wright, who climbed and participated in most outdoor sports. Finally, although they had never climbed ice, the two actors Brendon MacKey (Joe) and Nicholas Aaron (Simon) were excellent rock climbers who were the right age and appreciated the ethos of the book – and knew they would have to face up to their own climbing mates if they balls’d up the story.

Brian and his team were away for most of the year. When they returned, they were a bit coy about the result. There had been huge difficulties making the film and both Joe and Simon had been deeply affected by their return to Siula Grande. It was hard to gauge what impact the bust-up between Simon and the director (as related by Simon in his own article) might have on the end product. Then good things crept out about the rushes and the editing. And finally the film was screened, attracting superb reviews, at festivals at Telluride, Toronto, London and Dublin. That was followed by its gala premiere at the Kendal Mountain Film Festival in November 2003 with the film production team, Brian’s team of climbers, the actors and Joe (but not Simon) all there to take the credit.

Around 2000 people saw the film at Kendal (or Rheged) in six separate screenings – all sold out weeks in advance. Folk came from all around the UK and Europe. We soon realised that many were not climbers – they were devotees of the book and/or people seeking evidence of that vital force! Two journalists from *Outside* magazine flew in from the States late on the Sunday and we managed to get them into the last performance, where people were standing along the walls and sitting in the aisles.

I was struck by one common feature with all the *TTV* performances at Kendal – the silence at the end. People just sat there for the most part, stunned by what they had seen, perhaps struggling to find some mental and emotional parallel to help them define their lives in such terms, or perhaps thinking about lost friends. The film had that effect; people did touch the void.

Then as everyone streamed out, the excitement broke like an avalanche in a cacophony of exclamation, praise and debate. Not since David Breashears’ *Everest* had a climbing film attracted so much interest. However, unlike Breashears’ IMAX success, and unlike almost every other major climbing movie, the *Void* did not need Everest, the Eiger or Matterhorn as its setting. As Alex Huber proclaimed on his return to the bar from a Sunday

evening screening: 'At last, a real climbing film. They have shown it is possible.'

I began to wonder what makes 'a real climbing film'? I watch around 300 films a year while assembling a programme for the Kendal Festival. Many of these are 'real' climbing films, made by climbers for climbers. For the most part they are low budget and shot, at best, for television. And they are usually personal expressions of what individuals bring to, and back from, the mountains. Seeing Alex Huber's own film of his solo of the Cima Grande helped answer my question – what people most want from a climbing film is the triumph of life over death. The 'void' that people touch in either the book or the film is actually the space between life and death – the shadow world of the bottom of a crevasse where survival seems most improbable. So I come back full circle to my musing about what is spiritual, what is that life force and why the audiences love *TTV*? I think it is because it helps them to evoke a reaction to modernity, with all its false coatings of safety and protectionism.

The heritage and ethos of climbing throughout the British Isles has been under attack from many directions in recent years. Some press and politicians have tried to close off the mountains, to make us all pay insurance, and have stirred up misconceived outrage at so-called irresponsible behaviour. Public opinion can be easily led by this spin. Climbing has been depicted as selfish and self-destructive – an activity for weirdoes and misfits – or at best a barely acceptable remnant of Empire which has allowed us occasionally to cheer the conquest of some blank on the map.

Now a great story has been successfully made into a film that has won both the *Evening Standard* award for best film and a prestigious BAFTA award as the most outstanding British film. That goes some way towards redressing the balance. However, it may require a little thought as to why that is. As Michael Portillo commented in an arts review programme recently, going to see the *Void* is not the most relaxing way to spend a Saturday evening. Now at least a film has fairly placed the idea of 'real' adventure in front of worldwide audiences. And in the battle of great films, it is good to see the story of Joe and Simon up there with that of Sam and Frodo.