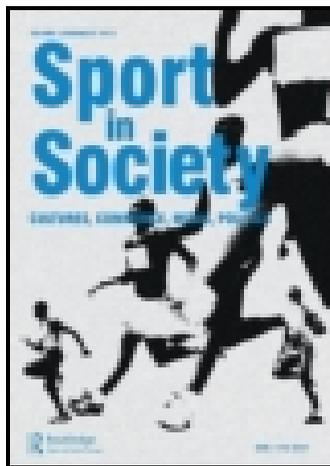


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Danny MacAskill and the visuality of the extreme

Clara S. Lewis^a

^a Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Stanford University, Stanford, CA USA

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Danny MacAskill and the visuality of the extreme

Clara S. Lewis

Program in Writing and Rhetoric, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article offers a visual analysis of online videos that feature innovative street trials cyclist Danny MacAskill. While MacAskill tends to be defined exclusively as an extreme athlete, this article instead considers his popular online videos as acts of poesies that make visible the theme of flourishing in the midst of uncertainty. Drawing on and contributing to extreme sports studies as well as recent social theory on precariousness, the article notes the understudied meaning making potential of extreme sports performances, which navigate the peril that characterizes contemporary existence through risk and play. I argue that MacAskill's videos deserve greater attention because he provides a counterexample to the kinds of hypermasculine extreme sports performances that have historically been studied. Ultimately, the article considers how analyzing MacAskill's videos can begin to redirect critical understandings of the relationship between cultural production, gender performance, and extreme sports.

Introduction

Washed in warm morning light, a cyclist pauses to take in the view above his hometown of Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye. From his perch high atop a flat roof over a single-room dwelling, he looks down on a small gathering of identically quaint white houses with black roofs next to a lake, azure as the nearly cloudless sky, guarded by tall trees. Distinct beams of golden-white light stripe the thin mist. No sign of industry or population or pollution. A moment passes in complete stillness. Then the cyclist flips forward off the roof. 360 degrees of flight and fall later, he skims over high grasses towards home. His hubs whirl riotously over the morning's vast hush.

The scene described above, which closes innovative street trials cyclist Danny MacAskill's online video collaboration with filmmaker Dave Sowerby, 'Way Back Home,' stands in stark contrast to other images of masculinity and risk dominant in global popular culture that define the iconography of extreme sports. Consider how Vin Diesel or riders in this year's Red Bull Rampage might be expected to celebrate a homecoming with binge drinking and fist pumping. These celebratory scripts stem from the pervasive use of extreme sports imagery in marketing campaigns for products that target young male consumers,

like energy drinks, who are assumed to identify with bro culture and its brand of adolescent hypermasculine posturing.¹ In this commercial role, extreme sports are often used to illustrate the maleness of risk-seeking, which then becomes evidence of male physical supremacy. Unlike these familiar images of extreme athletes, however, precariousness in MacAskill's work isn't an obstacle to conquer. For MacAskill, playing with peril is instead a method of making meaning out of shared human longings and vulnerabilities. In his visually arresting online videos, MacAskill weightlessly dances on a BMX bike over seemingly un-rideable terrain with the same fluid, buoyant grace usually associated with parkour and ballet. Interpreted through the lens of both extreme sports studies and cultural studies, MacAskill's videos can reveal a hidden universe of meaning within the visual culture of extreme sports.

The theme of precariousness, central in MacAskill's videos, is also a prominent concern of contemporary social theorists interested in globalization. As Bauman argues, we live in an 'age of uncertainty' that manifests itself in an individually experienced 'mood of precariousness' (2007). Similarly, Appadurai (2006) describes how the forces of globalization generate new links between uncertainty in social life and insecurity within and between states. Appadurai further calls attention to the cultural dynamics of these shifts, which can be seen in both the news media's and popular culture's obsessive fascination with the link between insecurity and catastrophic violence. Extreme sports, which prize risky tricks over traditional competition, also thrive in precariousness. Different from familiar images of mass destruction or zombie plague, however, the visual culture of extreme sports approaches peril through play.

In particular, online videos that feature MacAskill demonstrate how certain expressions of risky play can become a medium for telling stories about the role of fragility in fulfillment. Yet, even MacAskill at times participates in the commercial hypermasculinization of extreme sports, as exemplified in his recent advertisement for Red Bull filmed at the Playboy mansion. The tension between self-expressive play and performing gender that characterizes videos that feature MacAskill can be contextualized by a number of studies that explore the relationship between extreme sports and masculinity. This literature is split along methodological lines. Ethnographic inquiries, such as Robinson's (2008) study of rock climbing in the United Kingdom, Wheaton's study of windsurfing in England (2000), and Crocket's analysis of elite Ultimate in New Zealand (2012), demonstrate that within specific leisure sports communities competing masculinities are negotiated in new ways that can transcend fixed notions of what constitutes sporting masculinity. In contrast, media studies that interrogate how masculinity is performed when extreme sports are broadcast and marketed tend to underscore the ways in which these sports reproduce normative ideas about gender difference and the physical supremacy of white male athletes (Dunbar, Hunt, and Messner 2000; Kusz 2007, 2004; Parmett 2015; Rinehart 2005).

Where existing cultural studies focus on the social harm wrought by these sexist representations, I pivot toward expressive constraints and opportunities in the aesthetics of extreme sports. I argue that MacAskill's work deserves greater attention because he provides a counterexample, albeit imperfect, to the kinds of extreme sports performances that have historically been studied. MacAskill's complex relationship to gender performance suggests that the kinds of subtle renegotiations of masculinity that have been revealed through ethnographic analyses are beginning to migrate from individual extreme sports communities onto the computer screen. This migration is significant because it hints at a potentially lucrative market for cultural representations that transcend fixed ideas about how masculinity should

be performed in the context of sport. Thus, an analysis of videos that feature MacAskill can begin to redirect critical understandings of the relationship between cultural production, hypermasculinity, extreme sports, and even the gender politics of adult play.

Despite being recognized primarily as an athlete, MacAskill's work transgresses the imagined boundary between art and sport. As fellow Scottish stunt cyclist Ian Withers explains, MacAskill has 'a totally different attitude towards what is possible on a bicycle.' Rather than strength or skill, MacAskill explains his limitations in creative terms: 'the only thing stopping me now is my imagination,' (*New York Times*, December 28, 2009). Beyond being conceptually on par with performance art and modern dance pieces, discoveries from the medical and phenomenological side of extreme sports studies introduce the possibility for MacAskill's work to be conceived of as culturally therapeutic in ways that mirror what Willig (2008) terms the 'therapeutic achievement' of participation in an actual extreme sport. Even though extreme sports studies is itself an interdisciplinary field – with contributors from medicine, anthropology, psychology, sociology of sport, and feminist sports studies – its discoveries have not reached a wide audience in the interdisciplinary humanities or social sciences, likely due to the historical exclusion of somatic experience from the realm of 'serious' inquiry. Yet scholarship on extreme sports raises important questions about how we experience freedom that deserve greater attention outside the sub-field.

Implicitly, new scholarship on the experience of participating in an extreme sport decouples freedom and democracy to reveal the human animal luxuriating in the rigorous self-affirmation of play. Numerous studies suggest that these activities allow participants to experience emotions outside the bounds of everyday life and that they become unique pathways toward fulfillment (Breton 2000; Brymer and Oades 2009; Brymer and Schweitzer 2013; Duncan, Post, and Tashman 2014; Hetland and Vitterso 2012; Laviolette 2009; Pain and Pain 2005; Willig 2008). MacAskill's most significant cultural achievement is giving viewers a small taste of the complex, massively rewarding, potentially therapeutic emotional brew that elevates extreme sports experiences above everyday life. In embodying risky play's multifaceted potential, MacAskill's work imagines flourishing beyond the restrictive, high-revenue mythology of hypermasculinity that tends to dominate images of sport.

Gender politics and the optics of extreme sports

In the early 1990s, extreme sports and alternative athletes were marginalized, a sign of generation X's perceived slacker mentality. As that generation's economic power gained recognition from marketers, however, extreme sports moved into the mainstream. These sports are now integrated into high-revenue institutions including ESPN's X Games and the Olympics. Extreme sports had been originally associated with subcultures that rejected traditional performances of sporting masculinity; as they gained mainstream recognition, however, the culture surrounding extreme sports assumed many of the attributes of bro culture and its brand of adolescent hypermasculinity. Images of extreme athletes in action are now used to illustrate maleness as a celebration of narcissism, immaturity, risk-taking, and callous attitudes towards women and sex.

These misogynistic representations have been the focal point of critical scholarship on representations of extreme sports. This focus is justified by the prominence and popularity of hypermasculine depictions, but it does not fully capture the conceptual potential of extreme sports performances that MacAskill's work illustrates. Before analyzing MacAskill's videos in light of discoveries from extreme sports studies, however, it is necessary to briefly

review both the nature of these dominant depictions as well as the feminist critiques they inspire. MacAskill's videos are best understood in relation to the hegemony of extreme sports performances that operate within the narrow aesthetic confines of bro culture.

Current marketing for GoPro as well as popular crash and stunt compilation videos on YouTube illustrate how hypermasculine themes characterize representations of extreme sports. GoPro sells mountable waterproof cameras equipped with ultra wide-angle lenses. On the GoPro website, you can search for the perfect camera based on your activity of choice, including wakeboarding, rock climbing, cycling, moto, hunting, fishing, and, ominously, 'military.' In blue-and-black lettering, shoppers are urged to 'capture' their world and 'Be a Hero.' GoPro's homepage features pictures of five white men filming themselves and one image of a blond woman filming while being filmed, which allows viewers to see her slim body opposed to her viewpoint. There are no racial or ethnic minorities depicted. On the brink of going public, the company earned \$985.7 million in revenue in 2013, an impressive \$60.57 million in profit. In a recent profile of the company's 'mad billionaire' founder and CEO Nick Woodman, *Forbes* notes that, while Woodman is actually 37 years old, he acts 17. The article concludes that the 'man-teen,' who is known for emitting a loud howling 'EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEOW' sound while having fun, has enviably 'found bliss' (Mac 2013). Woodman's blissful 'EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEOW' is indicative of his company's public image, which strives to fully embody how extreme sports have traditionally been framed: as white and hypermasculine.

Popular extreme sport stunt and crash compilation videos on YouTube are framed to highlight similar themes as GoPro's homepage, evincing a familiar attitude towards risk, sport, and masculinity. When you begin to type 'extreme sport' into YouTube's internal search engine, 'compilation,' 'fail,' 'accident,' and 'gone wrong' automatically appear as suggestions for what to click next. These videos, which embed advertisements for brands like Red Bull and GoPro and serve as vehicles for additional ads, splice together short scenes of elite extreme athletes in the midst of enacting, or failing to enact, massively spectacular tricks. As a genre, complications move rapidly from one athlete's most spectacular stunt, or most daring fail, to the next, and so on. The sonic stand-in for adrenaline – house music – tends to bump in the background. These videos fit nicely with other bro culture trends, such as ESPN's looped instant replay or pornography's ubiquitous money shot. Much like typical heroes, warriors, and cowboys, male extreme athletes tend to be represented as risk-loving individuals: their singularly important bodies, or their point-of-view perspectives, are the focal point against dramatic vistas. They embody the triumph of man over the forces of nature, the splendor of male physical supremacy, the awe of boyish extravagance. In each instance, survival in a dangerous context is equated with manhood, an equation that defines hypermasculinity.

The single most widely viewed generically labeled 'extreme sport' video on YouTube, '✓100% Pure Awesome People ~ Extreme Sports Action,' is a representative, if also dazzling, example of the genre. Published on 7 March 2013 with the tag line 'This is CRAZY fast, POV dangerous and 100% Awesome! THESE people are amazing! You GOT TO LOVE GOPRO AND REDBULL!!!!,' the video has been viewed upwards of 7,000,000 times and garnered over 15,500 likes. The first three minutes of the video include all of the following scenes: a monster truck skidding on ice over a man's body without crushing it; POV hang gliding through snow-covered mountain passes; POV wakeboarding through cliff-lined rapids; 360-degree ski flips; 360-degree jet ski flips; 360-degree motocross flips; speed-fueled

free climbing; POV white-water rafting down a waterfall; wingsuit cliff diving; outdoor trial cycling jumps (performed by Danny MacAskill wearing a Red Bull helmet); airborne motorcycle stunts; kayaking stunts; tightrope walking over a canyon; single-track mountain bike riding; more cliff jumping; wingsuit skydiving; and a large group of skiers all performing 360-degree flips. There are still seven minutes of stunts and crashes remaining.

In '✓100% Pure Awesome People ~ Extreme Sports Action,' as in the other most popular extreme sport YouTube videos, each scene lasts a maximum of thirty seconds. Some are as short as five seconds. Many scenes show stunts or crashes from a distance. As athletes are fully clothed, often in protective gear, it is not always possible to identify their sex or gender. Many compilations include at least one image of a female extreme athlete in action. Yet, as a genre, crash and stunt compilations largely conform to hypermasculine ideals that portray female athletes as little more than eye candy. Even when women athletes are included, women's body parts, primarily naked lower abdomens or Brazilian bikini-covered bottoms, are often used as cover art to lure viewers into clicking on videos that then feature predominantly male athletes. Some of the most popular crash compilations add a sting of frat boy humor to these images; conventionally attractive female bodies, cropped below the face, are posed with legs awkwardly splayed open or with butts tangled in wedgies.

Read together, GoPro's homepage and YouTube's most popular extreme sport stunt and crash compilation videos highlight the masculinized nature of these sports' visual culture. Scholars in feminist sports studies and whiteness studies have interrogated these kinds of representations and arrived at several important critiques. In an analysis of race, media, and the emergence of extreme athletes in the United States, Kyle Kusz argues that images like the one crafted by GoPro exist within a specific social and historical context. 'Media stories which celebrated extreme sports as a contemporary extension of the hearty, masculinizing, democratic ideals first espoused by our (white male) American forefathers,' argues Kusz, 'express contemporary white desires not only to re-center white masculinity within mainstream American sports culture at a time when it has been challenged, but also they rearticulate white masculinity with American national identity at a time when this link also has been threatened by revisionist histories and multicultural advocates' (2007). From Kusz's perspective, campaigns like GoPro's 'Be a Hero' participate in a broader reactionary post-civil rights, post-feminism politics that is as pronounced in mainstream sports as in extreme sports.

The gender politics of mainstream sports have been a critical focal point for scholars in feminist sports studies. This field makes two relevant contextual claims about how gender ideals inform depictions of the body's sporting abilities, which are then understood to be natural and innate. First, mainstream, high-revenue sports including football, hockey, and basketball are based on fitness criteria that elevate most males over most females with success in competition hinging on height, strength, and speed. Robert Rinehart explains how mainstream sports have been framed in ways that naturalize the myth of male physical supremacy:

Sport, a pervasive facet of modern day, consumer society, is not naturally male. It has only been framed that way ... [T]he social construction of sport that privileges male dominance has been naturalized, unquestioned, and ultimately accepted. It is a model based on an ideology that generally believes that sport is a positive force in socializing and educating mostly male youth, and it serves to reinforce the impression of male dominance both within and outside of sport venues. (2005)

As Rinehart notes, the fitness parameters of mainstream sports disadvantage most female athletes. This mythology of the male body is a multibillion-dollar industry that inspires some of the most intense feelings of identification available in contemporary consumer society.

Second, feminist sports studies highlight how this framing harms gender-nonconforming athletes. 'Emphasizing style over athleticism denies female athletes the merits of their skills, strength, and accomplishments,' argues Webster in her analysis of the stylistic performance of female athleticism. She concludes that 'female athletes are measured by the degree to which they perform sports according to stylistic standards of beauty and body size. Moreover, non-conforming bodies become marginalized, silenced, and blocked from view, leaving little room for difference and change' (2009). It is important to note here that despite highly gendered framing, the fitness criteria that determine success in most extreme sports, which include agility, balance, stamina, visual acuity, risk management, persistence, creativity, and inventiveness, tap into the body's poetic sensibilities. These are gender-neutral skills with significant narrative and aesthetic appeal.

Despite this fluid self-expressive potential, economic and social pressures tend to limit the iconography of extreme sports in heavily masculinized ways. As the GoPro and '✓100% Pure Awesome People ~ Extreme Sports Action' examples underscore, depictions of hypermasculinity prove profitable. In a study of box art on video games rated Teen and Mature, Near found that 'there is an economic motive for the marginalization and sexualization of women,' which leads to 'greater audience exposure to stereotypical depictions than to alternative depictions because of their positive relationship to sales' (2013). As Near's study demonstrates, advertisers targeting adolescent male audiences are keenly aware of the relationship between hypermasculine images, which sexualize or marginalize women, and sales. But profit is only one factor. Beyond economics, both mainstream and extreme sports have historically functioned as social spaces where certain expected 'hegemonic' expressions of masculinity are 'made and remade' (Wellard 2009, 21). As Wellard (2009) observes in his study of sport, masculinity and the body, even everyday non-professional athletics tend to require male participants to perform their masculinity in conventional ways, both on the court and in the locker room.

Unfortunately, making and remaking defines repetition. The existing critiques detailed above usefully highlight the social harm wrought by framing both mainstream and extreme sports in hypermasculinized ways. This study argues that in addition to social harm, bro culture and hypermasculinity also limit the aesthetic, narrative, and conceptual range of possibilities for extreme sports performances. In doing gender, these popular depictions get stuck in redundancy. At first, GoPro footage and compilation videos can amaze. How can the human body do that? And that? And that? But there are only so many times a viewer can experience true awe at the same kind of spectacle, even if that spectacle involves death-defying acrobatics previously beyond the scope of imagination. The stunts vary widely, but the storyline stagnates: each micro-scene simply announces, 'Look at this big trick' or 'look at this big trick fail.' Compilation videos don't so much play with precariousness as they cheer on a rejection of sane risk management in favor of ever more impressive stunts. Ultimately, this quest for the epic stales into the mundane.

In this context, performing extreme sporting masculinity seems to snuff out the possibility for feeling, seeing, or experiencing anything beyond gender difference. There simply isn't time for narrative development or emotional connection in five to thirty seconds of intense action. As American studies scholar Charity Fox explained during a personal conversation,

these images are perpetually stuck in ‘postmodernity’s traumatic present.’ In foregrounding a limited spectacle of male risk-seeking, these videos present a distorted image of extreme sports that leaves these sports’ numerous other emotional qualities and aesthetic possibilities unexplored, including the embodiment of imagination, freedom, and self-affirmation. Key findings from the field of extreme sports studies further distill the multifaceted significance of depicting these sports as an exclusive playground for privileged hypermasculinity and contribute to explaining the importance of MacAskill’s select few performances that defy the genre’s clichéd norms.

Extreme sports studies

Extreme sports studies is a robust area of inquiry with contributors from medicine, psychology, anthropology, sociology of sport, and feminist sports studies. Beyond being disciplinarily diverse, the literature on extreme sports importantly contributes to areas of universal fascination, including wellbeing, human potential, embodied liberation, and how to access the best, most emancipatory, emotions possible. Despite being narrowly focused on extreme sports, this body of scholarship deserves a wide interdisciplinary audience. Further, given its insight into how humans work toward freedom and fulfillment, extreme sports studies intervenes within what hooks (2013) describes as today’s reining ‘faux feminism,’ which confuses gender equality with earning potential and corporate status.

Most of the medical and psychological literature on extreme sports posits that ‘risk taking is not pathological’ and that participation in extreme sports provides unique health and wellness benefits (Brymer and Oades 2009, 116). Doctors Pain and Pain (2005) and Burr (2013) defend extreme sports from an evolutionary perspective and assert that risk and fear are genetically hardwired educational resources that can help motivate healthy physical activity. ‘We are evolved for exploration and risk,’ state Pain and Pain (2005). ‘Risk taking,’ concludes Burr, ‘is inherently human and can be an important factor in personal development’ (2013). Beyond praising risk, these doctors note that popular images of extreme sports mask how athletes acquire the skills necessary to perform stunts: ‘Popular portrayal of many adventure sports is of death-defying acrobatics, but most of the athletes concerned are among the elite in their sport and they have mastered the skill necessary to control the potential risk through small incremental challenges’ (Burr 2013, 1311). As Burr explains, what often looks like a death wish is actually the earned accomplishment of deep learning over time. From a medical perspective, the riskiness of extreme sports, if managed responsibly, inspires focus and flow, triggers endorphin reactions, and sparks feelings of enjoyment and reinforcement. Unlike typical fitness regimes, which share more DNA with work than play, the intensely engaging qualities of extreme sports help form a lasting commitment to physical activity.

In addition to contributing to physical fitness, participation in extreme sports offers a range of unique, highly desirable psychological benefits. A number of phenomenological studies explore what motivates and sustains participation in extreme sports. Reading across this literature, I was struck by how many researchers began their studies wondering why anyone would want to participate in something as seemingly unpleasant as jumping out of an airplane or hanging off of a rock face or traversing the Atlantic in a kayak, only to end their work with new questions about our very experiences of freedom or, as Lavolette describes his own inquiry into cliff jumping, which included taking several leaps himself, the ‘emancipatory potential of liberating oneself from earthy constraints’ (2009).

These studies reveal that extreme sports are perceived by their participants as avenues for self-expression; personal transfiguration; transcending the confines of the self; personal generation of meaning; feelings of internal strength; fullness of being; embodied imagination; the cultivation of awe, wonder, humility, and courage; immersion in the present; flow; moments of total happiness; stress reduction; managing existence tensions in creative, purposeful ways; greater self awareness; the promotion of curiosity; exploration leading to absorption, discovery, and pleasure; explosive personal growth; an awareness of the fragility of and delights in life; social connectedness; affirmation; legitimacy; development of personal skills needed to overcome fear and manage risk self-reliantly (Breton 2000; Brymer and Oades 2009; Brymer and Schweitzer 2013; Duncan, Post, and Tashman 2014; Hetland and Vitterso 2012; Laviolette 2009; Pain and Pain 2005; Staleton and Terrio 2012; Willig 2008). As humanistic psychologists Brymer and Oades argue, participation in extreme sports 'results in positive psychological changes' (2009).

Beyond what Willig describes as these sports' 'therapeutic achievement', phenomenological studies also underscore stunning emotional highs earned by playing with precariousness. Carla Willig describes this process as 'the achievement of experiential qualities that transcend normal everyday experience' (2008). Similarly, Hetland and Vitterso examine the emotional landscape of extreme sports and ask: 'Is it possible to identify the quality and intensity of the best feelings imaginable?' They conclude that these activities 'produce otherwise inaccessible feelings of joy and elation.' The interest, engagement and vitality their respondents reported were rooted in 'emotional states related to processes of fulfilling one's potential, experiencing meaning in life, and developing a sense of one's self' (2012). For Laviolette, cliff jumping is the essence of 'fully embodied euphoria' (2009). Fear intensifies these emotions. Brymer and Schweitzer explain how fear in the context of an extreme sport can become a 'transformative process': 'Participants experience of extreme sports was revealed in terms of intense fear but this fear was integrated and experienced as a potentially meaningful and constructive event in their lives' (2013). In a broader philosophical rumination on play, Fezell describes these rare emotional states as 'bracketing' the ordinary so that life can be lived 'more intensely, more joyously' (2004).

At the pinnacle of these peak emotional states resides freedom. 'Motivations in extreme sport do not simply mirror traditional images of risk taking and adrenaline,' explain Brymer and Schweitzer. 'Motives also include exploration of the way in which humans seek fundamental values.' Brymer and Schweitzer found that the extreme athletes they interviewed reported experiencing six different elements of freedom, namely, 'freedom from constraint, freedom as movement, freedom as letting go of the need for control, freedom as release from fear, freedom as being at one, and finally freedom as choice and responsibility' (2013). Thinking about the relationship between freedom, play and sport, Fezell suggests that part of sport's liberating potential lies in its ability to inspire identification and enable self-expression: 'To understand the freedom of play as identification is to see that in playful activity some important reality of the self is affirmed. The freedom of play is the freedom to engage in self-affirmation' (2004).

Importantly, there is no connection between the freedom found in play and biological sex. As Fezell notes, to identify with sport, to find freedom in play, is to identify with the 'animal joy of physical activity' (2004). Gender distinctions are not made within the phenomenological literature on extreme athletes' motivations: these studies are based on interviews with both male and female athletes and do not arrive at gendered conclusions,

indicating that the motivations for men and women are the same. Yet, researchers who embark on these studies invariably find more men to interview than women, which reflects the overarching demographic composition of extreme sports.

As mentioned in the previous section, existing research on the visual culture of extreme sports details how these sports tend to be used as vehicles for affirming hypermasculinity, usually in advertising contexts. Instead of seeing freedom and imagination embodied, audiences tend to see hypermasculinity performed, normalized, and celebrated. Placing these studies in conversation with medical, psychological, and anthropological literature on the nature of extreme sports experiences raises new questions about how these cultural trends limit the meaning of adult play.

Yet, as MacAskill's most popular online videos reveal, depictions of extreme play can be powerful tools for making meaning out of the precariousness that defines existence. A close reading of MacAskill's work highlights the aesthetic and narrative potential of extreme sports performances and, thus, provides a positive, yet also imperfect, counterexample to the kinds of predictable performances that have been the focus of previous research. Imperfect because MacAskill, who is a Red Bull sponsored athlete, occasionally makes videos that participate in the commercial affirmation of hypermasculinity, while at other times he maximizes the conceptual richness of extreme sports performances that forgo reproducing restrictive gender norms. Given this underlying tension, MacAskill's body of work both highlights how performing gender tends to limit extreme sports performances, while also underscoring the value of visual culture that depicts extreme play.

Danny MacAskill: street trails cycling as cultural therapy

Where most extreme sports performances affirm hypermasculinity, many of MacAskill's videos instead maximize the aesthetic and narrative potential of extreme play. His five most-viewed Youtube videos – 'Inspired Bicycles' (2009) 'Industrial Revolutions' (2011), 'Way Back Home' (2010), 'Imagine' (2013), and 'Epecuén' (2014) – each venture into extreme sports' ability to make meaning outside of gender affirmation. In embodying the creative potential and radical ethos of extreme sports, MacAskill's work makes visible the resonance that precariousness adds to existence. His work is also hugely popular: his videos have been viewed upwards of 75 million times, which reveals a potentially lucrative market for cultural representations that transcend fixed ideas about how masculinity should be performed in the context of sport. Surprisingly, given this popularity, MacAskill's films often darken exhilaration with tinges of anguish.

MacAskill's first viral video, 'Inspired Bicycles,' observes him striving to master a series of seemingly impossible tricks, including flipping 360 degrees up and off a tree trunk. The video begins with a quiet shot of sunrise over Edinburgh. MacAskill slowly rides into the frame, awkwardly leaning to the left of his small BMX bike. He wears green gloves to protect his hands and a helmet. In the next scene, MacAskill rides alongside a spiky metal fence. He pauses, then dismounts from his bike to pull a road sign with parking rules out of the ground. In the next shot, it becomes clear that the sign was moved to accommodate MacAskill's leap onto an electrical utility box, which reads, 'Danger of Death. Keep Off.'

As soon as he steers the bike from the box to the fence, he falls. But it is not a spectacular crash so much as a controlled, slow leaning off to the side. He lands on his feet. The bike catches on the fence rails. The back tire bends. In the next shot, MacAskill bangs the bent wheel back to true with a piece of plywood. Then he is back up on the fence. The second

time, he rides out part of the way then begins to lose balance. He sticks his left leg off to the side in an effort to stabilize. But, slowly and with control, falls again. The fall itself seems safe, the expenditure of physical capital earned through a lifetime of practice. The camera lingers over MacAskill's frustration: he lowers his head between his shoulders, slumping toward the handlebars. Then he's back on the utility box. Using his hips to skip the bike into alignment with the fence, he maintains perfect steadiness with no momentum. Carefully, slowly, he rolls out onto the spikes. Using every sinew in his body to balance, he rides the whole fence and hops down gracefully. The somber indie music quietly darkening the background swells in an exhale of satisfaction and relief.

Frustration met with persistence is rewarded. MacAskill spends the next four minutes buoyantly dancing – or perhaps more accurately, flying – his bike over everyday obstacles including flights of concrete stairs, rows of park benches, and all manner of railings. He leaps from the awning of a bike shop to the awning of a copy shop next door. In the final scene, he jumps down from a bridge. The video is perfectly edited to match its soundtrack, 'The Funeral' by Band of Horses – the somber lyrics ('At every occasion I'll be ready for the funeral') adding a layer of meaning. The video allows viewers to witness the physical, emotional, and psychological qualities that elevate extreme sports experiences above everyday life. In his first video, MacAskill depicts the soaring natural high of embodied liberation, while also showing the role of measured risks in making these experiences worthwhile. We see him amid the difficult bliss of play's self-affirmation – a beautiful, rare sight. Within twenty-four hours of being posted on YouTube in 2009, the video was viewed hundreds of thousands of times. By May 2015, it had received over 36,313,510 views and garnered over 176,860 likes.

As 'Inspired Bicycles' demonstrates, MacAskill is as much an innovator within the visual culture of extreme sports as he is an athlete in the traditional sense. Where popular generically labeled 'extreme sports' videos on YouTube are limited by the narrow confines of hyper-masculinity, many of MacAskill's videos, which attract a larger audience, deftly navigate a sweeping range of themes including: the embodiment of imagination; the exhilaration of innovation; the infinite delight of challenging play; flow; the elusive desire to retreat into youth; the reward of learning through repeated failure; homecoming; the unmet desire for restoration after catastrophic loss; and the delights of transgression – or less dramatically, riding where it is explicitly against the law to do so.

Embedded within these sub-themes are unanswered questions about the ache for fulfillment amid the frictions of globalization. These films can be read as inspirational. They are visually arresting and brim with the unique aesthetic excellence of extreme sports performance. MacAskill packs each film with ever more dramatic falls, flips, and balances. In the world of cycling, MacAskill is admired as a bricoleur who collages together the technical aspects of mountain biking, trials competition, and BMX in ways that defy the confines of each discipline. His style becomes more punk, more elegant. He is clearly still growing as an athlete and a performer. But his videos are also deeply invested in rendering perpetual loss – loss of childhood, loss of industry, loss of home, loss after natural disaster, and the eventuality of parting with that which is most beloved, be it a loved one or a calling in life. As such, they can ambush with an unexpected, unparalleled mix of euphoria and grief.

For MacAskill these losses overlap. He describes his bike in anthropomorphic terms as his 'best friend' and talks openly about his fear of losing his ability to ride after an injury. He cast himself as a toy being played with in his video 'Imagine.' In 'Way Back Home,'

he makes a stunning, bittersweet journey from Edinburgh to his hometown of Dunvegan on the Isle of Skye. MacAskill prances his bike between boulders at the beach, delicately navigates empty post-industrial sites, and jumps over a telephone booth. In the background, indie artist Loch Lomond's 'Wax and Wire' plays softly. The song's narrator imagines an impossible revivification: 'I'd pull, tear away, at the earth with my teeth/The earth with my teeth to touch your face alive/You/Lie/Helplessly still/As your face falls apart/With wax and wires and hair from the back of your head/Well I can make your face brand new.'

I made the mistake of sharing 'Way Back Home' with my class of first-year students at New York University on the last day before Thanksgiving break in 2012. In two months, their relationship with home had already shifted. On a whim, I asked them to imagine how it might feel to return home like MacAskill. By the end of the video, the room was shaken. Several students were in tears. In this moment, for these students, the video captured the essence of homesickness and the uncomfortable premonition that home would never feel exactly the same as it had when they'd left it before the semester started. Much like the experience of participating in an extreme sport, MacAskill's videos evoke emotions outside the bounds of everyday life, perhaps in culturally therapeutic ways.

In a recent film, 'Epecuén,' MacAskill rides an expanse of wreckage. Shot in Epecuén, Argentina, the video opens with a scene of the town's lone, elderly resident, Pablo Novac, explaining the history of the place: 'In 1985 the rains came. The water from the lake rose through the streets. The town lay beneath the water and with time was forgotten. Then many years later the water subsided uncovering our town. I no longer see what use this place has for us now ...' The next ten minutes of video reveal what 'use' MacAskill can make of the rubble, while also lingering over the natural beauty of the wasteland. Filmmaker Dave Sowerby bends time to capture the landscape saturated in the colors of dawn and dusk. Stars drift quickly through an early morning sky; then the glow of a bright orange and pink sunset turns dark purple clouds into negative space. The wreckage could be anywhere after a bombing, tornado, hurricane, terrorist attack, or drone strike; yet the history of being underwater for so long gives Epecuén its own distinct visual features, the most stunning of which are whole trees turned to driftwood.

MacAskill showcases breathtaking stunts including 360-degree flips over street signs, massive drops, and precise leaps over and through unrecognizable obstacles, yet the play here is not taken lightly. Again he demonstrates a different attitude toward what is possible on a bike, both physically and conceptually. If the explicit premise of the video is to make 'use' of a place viewed by others as useless, it also implicitly questions the meaning of 'use' in this context. Clearly, Epecuén can't become a skate park or playground for most. MacAskill is one of very few cyclists in the world who can navigate this kind of highly varied terrain, and one of even fewer individuals who rides for a living in exotic locations.

Perhaps use is the video itself: street trials cycling transfigured into poiesis. In making the video and sharing it on YouTube, MacAskill invites his audience to look at a wasteland without the familiar tropes and truism that characterize depictions by the news media of natural disaster and war and by popular culture of the apocalypse. Watching MacAskill make 'use' of rubble and wreckage is to witness the fleeting revival of a place with no foreseeable human future. The second half of the video is choreographed to the Jezebels' song 'Long Highway.' A dark track opaquely about bad love lost, it describes the long highway as 'mesmerizing,' 'paralyzing,' and finally 'terrorizing.' In the final verse, the female singer growls 'Hear me roar/hear me roar/hear me roar.' MacAskill flips his bike in slow motion over the

remnants of a rusted street sign. Dusk falls. The wreckage darkens against a yellowing sky. The camera angle widens. Out of the unrecognizable rubble, a few familiar-looking electrical posts stand tall reminding viewers that this was once a home. Is it liberating to play in all this precariousness? Perhaps, but not without feeling some of the pain and euphoria that our usual myths anesthetize.

Conclusion

While many of MacAskill's videos offer a positive counterexample to other popular depictions of extreme sports, he is not entirely outside the genre's dominant commercial focus on hypermasculinity. In his most recent video for Red Bull, MacAskill rides outside the Playboy mansion. Different from his longer features detailed above, this video fits into a sub-genre of extreme sports performances that can best be described as a fusion of vicarious, voyeuristic tourism and sport. In this sub-genre, the extreme athlete is transported to an exotic location and filmed as he performs stunts in titillating scenery. MacAskill has shot similar videos on the streets of San Francisco, Cape Town, and Sydney.

In his most recent two-minute video, he cruises by pools filled with splashing 'bunnies' and does an impressively extended front wheelie down the mansion's iconic sloping lawn. Like the women, the soundtrack is bouncy and light. The colors are cheerful, illuminating a bright sunny afternoon spent in the company of fawning sirens. Like cheerleaders, the bunnies cluster together in anonymous groups, each as conventionally attractive as the next, none singularly distinct. Their main action in the video is to admire MacAskill's tricks, while also modeling bikinis.

The story is simple: MacAskill, an already popular extreme athlete, shows off for the bunnies. Two brands, Red Bull and Playboy, share cultural capital. The embodiment of play meets the embodiment of male sexual desire. Even though MacAskill actively plays, he appears as objectified as the bunnies. His stunts read as swagger, opposed to self-expression. In this context, MacAskill isn't playing with peril. Instead, the video implicitly reveals the peril commercialism presents to play itself: in the interest of selling energy drinks and soft-core pornography, one of today's gifted performance artists uses one of life's most potentially liberating, meaningful disciplines to showcase sexist suppositions about male physical supremacy.

Despite a vast universe of images that argue otherwise, the pleasures found in extreme sports are not gender specific. Neither are the fitness parameters that lead to success. Undermining this physical reality, hypermasculine cultural norms often reinvent within the white male body the genderless delight earned through physical exertion. These sexist tropes limit how the next generation is primed to imagine experiences of self-expression, identification, and pleasure that reside in the rituals of risky play. To exclude this kind of priming from debates over the gender gap is to aim for a partial equality that fails to address how freedom is actually experienced. Perhaps the popularity of MacAskill's unconventional videos hint at a willingness, or even longing, to see sports unbound from gendered clichés. This kind of unbinding is necessary both to actualize the full aesthetic potential of extreme sports performances and to actualize the full potential of gender equality.

Note

1. 'Bro culture' refers to a young, white male subculture that is associated with conventional, if also exaggerated, expressions of masculinity and fraternity behavior, including binge drinking and prioritizing male friendships over respect for women. 'Hypermasculinity' is a

gender-based ideology characterized by exaggerated beliefs about what it means to be a man. These beliefs conflate masculinity with toughness, violence, the perception that danger is exciting, and calloused attitudes towards women and sex. For a more in-depth definition see Vokey, Tefft, and Tysiaczny (2013).

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