

Anhedonia and Alternative Sports

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RÉSUMÉ : L'incapacité contemporaine d'éprouver du plaisir est concomitante à la ruée vers des expériences médiatisées comme expériences de plaisir qui sont expérimentées rapidement et de façon épisodique. Cela constitue une facette très importante de la nature paradoxale de la manière dont nos contemporains organisent leur vie. Les sports alternatifs, les sports de glisse, de l'extrême, du freestyle fournissent un domaine d'étude privilégié pour étudier cette incapacité à éprouver du plaisir (anhédonisme) chez le sujet postmoderne contemporain. L'article explique les mécanismes sociologiques, anthropologiques et émotionnels de cette nouvelle construction sociale.

MOTS CLÉS : Sport, plaisir, sujet postmoderne, frustration, consommation.

ABSTRACT: The vague sense of being unable to experience pleasure, and the rush to experience it quickly, episodically, and deeply, is a key paradox in contemporary life. Alternative sport (whiz, extreme, action, and lifestyle) provides an interesting setting for studying this contemporary anhedonic expression in the postmodern subject.

KEYWORDS: Sport, pleasure, postmodern subject

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: *Anhedonie und alternative Sportarten*

Die heutige Unfähigkeit Spaß zu empfinden geht einher mit einem Andrang auf mediatisierte Erfahrungen als Spaßerfahrungen, die schnell und episodisch erfahren werden. Dies stellt eine wichtige Facette der paradoxalen Art und Weise dar, auf die unsere Zeitgenossen ihr Leben organisieren. Die alternativen Sportarten, die Gleit-, Extrem- und Freestyle-Sportarten bieten sich besonders gut an, die Unfähigkeit Spaß zu erfahren (Anhedonie) bei den heutigen postmodernen Menschen zu untersuchen. Der Artikel erklärt die soziologischen, anthropologischen und emotionalen Mechanismen dieser neuen gesellschaftlichen Konstruktion.

SCHLAGWÖRTER: Sport, Spaß, postmodernes Subjekt, Frustration, Konsum

RESUMEN: *Anhedonia y deportes alternativos*

La incapacidad contemporánea para sentir placer es concomitante a la estampida de experiencias mediatizadas consideradas como placenteras que son vividas rápidamente y de manera esporádica. Ello constituye una faceta muy importante de la naturaleza paradójica de la manera en la que nuestros contemporáneos organizan su vida. Los deportes alternativos, los deportes de desplazamiento, de lo extremo, del freestyle (estilos libres), entregan un dominio de estudio privilegiado para estudiar esta incapacidad para sentir placer (anhedonismo) en el sujeto contemporáneo postmoderno. El artículo explica los mecanismos sociológicos, antropológicos y emocionales de esta nueva construcción de sociedad.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Deporte, placer, sujeto postmoderno, frustración, consumo.

RIASSUNTO: Anedonia e sport alternativi

L'incapacità contemporanea di provare del piacere è concomitante alla corsa verso esperienze mediatizzate come quelle di piacere che sono sperimentate rapidamente e in maniera episodica. Ciò costituisce un aspetto molto importante della natura paradossale della maniera con cui i nostri contemporanei organizzano la loro vita. Gli sport alternativi, gli sport di scivolamento, dell'estremo, del freestyle forniscono un ambito di studio privilegiato per studiare questa incapacità a provare del piacere (anedonismo) nel soggetto post-moderno contemporaneo. L'articolo spiega i meccanismi sociologici, antropologici ed emozionali di questa nuova costruzione sociale.

PAROLE CHIAVE: consumo, frustrazione, piacere, soggetto post-moderno, sport.

Anhedonia (an'hē dō'nē ə), n. *Psychol.* lack of pleasure or of the capacity to experience it. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1969, p. 58

The 21st Century: a millennial shift, with its requisite technologies that arguably separate us all from each other – we communicate with colleagues two doors down on computer, by email; we text on phones instead of meeting for a coffee; some of us even experience sexual gratification via our technological devices, eschewing the risk of rejection from another real person in favor of the instrumentality of efficient, disposable sex with ourselves (cf. Bauman, 2003). But don't just take my word for it. Zygmunt Bauman points out a similar phenomenon: "the advent of virtual proximity renders human connections simultaneously more frequent and more shallow, more intense and more brief" (2003: 62). Seeming pleasure isn't necessarily actual pleasure.

In short, in many areas, we have replaced human interaction with human-machine, or human-material-object, interaction¹. But, accompanying this social withdrawal is a concomitant explosion of often solitary, often narcissistic, frequently self-centered and selfish physically-active behavior – termed, variously, lifestyle, action, extreme, outdoor challenge, "whiz", and alternative sports. The names, of course, matter, but that is not my primary pursuit here; the fact that these activities have been counted, and numbers of participants

estimated, with projections for profits deriving from such activities: that is what really matters.

The activities reflect an American – and in many ways, international – sub-cultural attitude favoring what Roger Cailliois (2001 [1961]) termed *ilinx* pursuits: activities high on the scale of vertiginous, disorienting, thrilling experiences. These experiences are, almost by definition, momentary, transitory, ephemeral: this is one of the pleasing effects of them. Their sensory experience is here and gone. They become memories almost as soon as they are enacted. And, from a psychological perspective, their allure is aligned with the "intermittent rewards" that they grant participants, the momentary fractious frisson that pervades their capture. You simply cannot hold these experiences long: that fact makes them all the more coveted, all the more objects of desire.

Thus, the pleasure effect of thrill sports – the name itself gives away the sense of it – is the rush, the unwieldy loss of control, perhaps the seeming-pushing of limits. But it is more than that: the pleasure effect, like most of these *ilinx*-prevalent activities – which have morphed into these kinds of sports and events – is in the re-narrativizing of them, the nostalgia effects that they produce. These nostalgic shadows, like the lingering traces of human bodies at

¹ Our "social science" observations of such phenomena as human-object, human-machine, human-nonhuman relationships have, to some extent kept pace with the actual interactions: see, e.g., Bruno Latour (2005), Nigel Thrift (2008), and John Law's (2004) works on Action Network and Non-Representational Theories, for example.

Nagasaki and Hiroshima, imply the events of their participation, but the instance of their making is only momentary. And like the victims at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the participants of these activities have been impacted by a global (really, global) tsunami of changed sensibilities and altered realities.

Thus, *samplers* of these activities, recounting the momentary rush of excitement or terror, usually do not experience what Denzin (2001 [1989]: 145-46) terms “a major epiphany”, but rather are closer to the “relived epiphany”, where one singular event casts new meaning on future events. For example, someone who decides, on a lark, to bungee jump into a river during holiday might relive that moment and see him or herself in a different light in the future: as a daring risk-taker. She can also purchase the video “evidence” of that jump, which has been neatly packaged and marketed to sport tourists. Conversely, of course, the experience of jumping may affect that person so that they seek more calm, mundane, “safe” activities in the future. Clearly, the event has impacted them.

But, in an age of almost constant messages, advertising, and corporate branding – ever more creative and subtle, even subliminal – the question remains: to what degree does the experience affect and influence participants? To what degree do they experience, and embed, these depthless moments of pleasure? Or do they simply tick the experience off, running to the next thrill, forgetting or dismissing the current experience? A series of peak experiences, run one after another without pause, become muddled experiences, and the pleasure that accrues is less than stellar.

Denzin’s sense of epiphanies is important not only in apprehending the smoke-and-mirrors that is produced by (some) Hollywood films, but also in applying the sense of flattened affect to contemporary sport forms. He writes:

In whatever form, bizarre, frightening, dramatic, or mundane, such contact [with the terror and repressive taken-for-grantedness of the

postmodern] produces a shock of recognition in terms of lifestyle, and personal meaning. At the level of collective lived experiences, the epiphanic approach aims to identify how different social and cultural groupings attach themselves to and come to grips with those traces of postmodernism that invade and become part of their lives. (1991: 13)

Similarly, sport forms have sought to recreate the same experience, the same bodily experience, of participation in physically-active sports or experiences by compressing the temporal element of the experience: it is more efficient. But has the postmodern or contemporary body kept up with the onslaught of compressed time that is becoming commonplace in all sports forms?

In mainstream sports, we have a media-influenced trend toward shorter events (20-20 cricket, rugby sevens), presumably because the attention span of audiences has shortened, but it is also due to a greater choice for spectators. The quick shortened version of sports therefore gains a maximum audience.

In alternative sports, similar trends have occurred. In fact, alternative sports may have begun this trend, with its method of MTV-style quick shots, rather than following the whole trick: this foreshortened version of the trajectory of sport *implies* the whole event, but certainly doesn’t deliver the whole event. The satisfaction of what Jayne Caudwell (in press) terms “mundane motion” in physical activity has been subsumed by Kroker, Kroker, and Cook’s (1989) postmodern implosion, as evidenced in their *Panic Encyclopedia*: the instant fix of culture through a series of “panics”.

One moment can certainly become deeply felt and profound in one’s life (cf. Denzin 2001 [1989]): the way that some extreme sport athletes experience the rush – that is, the sense of Lyng’s “risk” (Lyng, 2005a, 2005b) – may be “an escape to a sensual universe of emotional intensity and self-determination” (Lyng, 2005b: 31). Lyng admits that “edgework does not allow one to *transcend* the extant social reality of consumer

culture; the experience merely represents an extension of that reality” (2005b: 33, emphasis in original). Yet, a certain assumption of Lyng’s thesis is that edgework – that is, the practice of risk taking in a variety of fields – “is a response to the over-determined character of *modern* social life” (2005a: 5, emphasis added) that occurs more frequently and with greater intensity in the late-20th Century than ever before.

I suggest that Lyng’s characterization of a risk factor in these “life-threatening experiences [which] come to acquire a seductively appealing character in the contemporary social context” (Lyng, 2005a: 5) has been, like many mediated late-modern and poststructuralist realities, somewhat overblown. To state that true “edgework” motivates a surprising amount of individuals in their pursuit of “life-threatening” endeavors is, I believe, overstating the case. Compared to such motivations as the sense of freedom from watchful adult supervision/surveillance, the sense of empowerment, the sense of camaraderie with mates, and/or the sense of self-efficacy that she (or he)² can derive from participation in these alternative activities, “edgework” seems relatively rare. Though one surrounds him or herself with fellow “edgeworkers” – who are aggressively “alternative” to the mainstream – that of course does not mean that the world in general has followed along.

I do want to believe in Lyng’s proposal, but I think he premises the ubiquitousness of edgework on assumption of contemporary culture that parallels Gonzo journalism as interpreted by Hunter S. Thompson. By his own admission, Thompson was an aberration to mass cultural values, not a standard of them; an alternative, not a mainstreamer; an exception, not a rule. Of course, there are those who are attracted to police work, extreme sports, performance art, primarily because of its so-called

edginess, but, as extreme, action, alternative, and other kinds of sports and activities have grown in popularity, there is likely an inverse relationship with the percentages of people who begin simply because of its self-promoting sense of “edginess”.

As well, there is the Robert Putnam³ thesis regarding a decline in American “social capital”. In this work, he points out an obvious trend towards civic disengagement in the United States, commenting that “networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust” (1995: 67). Accounting for a heightened “technological social-capital formation [which is] ‘privatizing’ or ‘individualizing’ our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation” (75), he hints at the inverse relationship between social capital and the commodification of contemporary life. Some grass-roots sectors of the lucrative alternative, extreme, action, and outdoor challenge sports might still be bucking this trend toward a lessened “social-capital formation”, but the commodification process works insistently to objectify and thus de-humanize participants. When athletes consciously seek to become “models of consumption based on fan identification” (Rinehart, 1998: 407), they draw away from community concerns and have become seduced by greater self-centered and – individualized interests.

The *caveat*, of course, is the conditional nature of what one can gain: just as in mainstream sports – where a good model can be attenuated and perverted by those who deliver it – so too can participation in adventure, action, outdoor challenge, and other alternative-to-the-mainstream types of activities become commodified and, thus, perverted by others with more power than the participants. Participants who seek

2 The gendered nature of alternative sports, in any form, is well documented (see, for example, Beal 1996; Rinehart 1999; Thorpe 2005; Wheaton & Tomlinson 1998). Though there are hopeful pockets of breakthrough, for the most part these action/extreme sports have reflected the dominant mainstream sport models, which, in turn, have reflected the dominant patriarchal societal models extant in the 21st Century world.

3 I am grateful to Jayne Caudwell for pointing out this piece.

commodification begin the process of loss of civic engagement (read: primary identification with mates, with peers). This aspect of commodification, at least in the early-21st Century, seems to wash out any grounding, fundamental edginess and alternative natures of these sport activities. In objectifying both the pursuit of “more shallow, more intense and more brief” (Bauman, 2003: 62) physical interactions, they inculcate values that teach many participants how to evade and ignore pleasures while ironically *feeling* they remain deeply embedded in highly-pleasurable experience.

COMMODIFICATION: THE PROCESS

Much of the recent study of these types of activities has based itself upon the “representations and commodification of the sports within consumer culture” (Ormrod, 2009: vi). That is to say, there has been an insistence that these sports have become commodified, through a process that is irrevocably linked to consumerism and consumer culture. But what is commodification?

Simply stated, commodification is the economic process by which something – some process, some previously-unvalued object – becomes an economic object for commerce. Moor (2007), however, points out some of the “ubiquitous” ways that sports scholars have used the term “commodification” – often resulting in less-than-nuanced ways of conceptualizing “the ways markets and market logic are introduced into” football (132).⁴ She also sees that many of the uses of the term by sport scholars “to refer to any instance of commercial activity by clubs (and fans) blunts its usefulness” (132).

Andrews and Ritzer (2007), following Ritzer (1993, 1998, 2005, 2006), locate commodification within a dynamic relationship of global

and local, with the effects of this relationship resulting in somewhat shared integration of global and local (glocal), or in the global influence effectively impacting and altering the local (grobal). Thus, in discussing anhedonia and alternative sports, the process of commodification has come to mean those objects or processes which, along the continuum of global and local, and along the pressure – and fault – lines of glocal and grobal, have gone from activities for their own sake to activities which are done with an instrumental eye to creating an economic object for commerce.

In some ways, looking at branding, iconography, and the cultural capital that sediments and accrues in these alternative sports objects and processes depends upon a recognition of the grobal: what Ritzer calls the “imperialistic ambitions of corporations, organizations” (2006: 338) always tinges and impacts even the local grass-roots participants. As a simple example, we only have to look to grass-roots skaters (skateboarders or inline skaters), those out skating in small groups, informally: but it is important to remember that, as soon as their images hit the internet, they have become a functional part of the commoditizing machinery. Pretty much gone⁵ are the days when they craft their own boards out of wood, or even somehow fabricate trucks or skates into a viable unit. In the 21st Century, having the “right” equipment – that is, the most functional, stylish, and currently fashionable, within one’s means – has become a fundamental (and naturalized) requirement of participation in action and extreme sports.

But the concept of the grobal and glocal also ranges beyond the mere commodification of tools and objects. Just as marketing for lifestyle in the 1970s and 80s changed the way consumerist culture operates, so too it changed

4 The term “commodification” has, until fairly recently, also been used by those in business as meaning the process wherein similar niched products become relatively indistinguishable to one another: thus their value drops, and they have become mere commodities. To distinguish between “commodification” in the two senses, the term “commoditization” has taken on the latter meaning.

5 “Pretty much gone”: of course, there are the rare exceptions, as Rinehart and Grenfell (2002) point out in their ethnography exploring the creation of a neighborhood BMX track.

what objects and processes could be commodified (cf. Goldman and Papson, 2000).

For example, Tinning and Fitzclarence (1992) discuss physical education students in secondary schools in Australia.⁶ They determined that these postmodern subjects/consumers desired to become “producers of their own biographies” (299) wherein they became engaged in their own eclectic senses of what constituted physical activity, but not in the packaged forms of institutionalized programming.

In other words, they “are active in accepting or rejecting the messages that physical education (and the media) presents” (299), they self-choose activities, and they look towards very pragmatic reasons for engaging in any activity. They are demonstrating some agency, but within (and against) narrow confines of institutional culture. Though Tinning and Fitzclarence did not use the terms “glocal” and “grobal”, they were describing the influences of both – synthesized and “colonizing” global and local cultural influences – within that emerging world of secondary physical education in Australia.

It is noteworthy that Tinning and Fitzclarence’s study was published in 1992, just after the emergence of explicitly neoliberal agendas in both the UK and the USA. The uncanny and misguided senses of Reaganomics and Thatcherism, which effectively dismantled the essential Western governmental role of encouraging egalitarian opportunities for their citizens, is, of course, still in play twenty years later. We see the effects of neoliberalism in the privatization of sport, leisure, and educational delivery systems, among many other de-centralized mechanisms (cf. Giroux, 2012).

One of the purported goals of neoliberalism was to reverse the trends of liberal democracies as well as “social democratic states (such as Scandinavia or Britain in the immediate post-war period)” (Harvey, 2005: 71). These states, according to Harvey,

had long taken key sectors of the economy such as health care, education, and even housing out of the market on the grounds that access to basic human needs should not be mediated through market forces and access limited by ability to pay. (71)

Of course, the whole process of neoliberalism reduces the government’s contribution, and increases pressures on individuals: thus, we return to the entrepreneurial statuses of would-be commodified action-sport participants.

We see the effects of neoliberalism in tertiary institutions that insist their employees use their “branding” – for example, on Microsoft® Power Point® presentations – to compete in an educational climate that is driven by market profits. Just as athletes become commodified, and sport formations become commodified, so too do large institutions – until commodification itself seems to be a natural thing. But its very ubiquity leads logically to forms of anhedonism.

The incentives for what Arlo Eisenberg once – less than 20 years ago! – fondly termed “lifestyle choices, in artistic presentations of the self as skater” (in Rinehart, 1998: 404) have clearly been influenced heavily by a west-driven, and now grobal, neoliberal agenda. And the process of commodification – with its logics of the inverse relationships between becoming an object of the free market and the experience of joy and pleasure – just as clearly reduces the initial pleasures of participation for individuals. This is the slow slide from play to work, especially for successful activities, writ large on the now-commodified alternative, extreme, action, lifestyle, outdoor challenge scene.

But each of these categories has its own story. In the next section, I will attempt to sketch out how some of the similarities – and differences – between the commodification practices of these different physical activities may be playing out. This is, however, an initial

⁶ I am grateful to Clive Pope for alerting me to this article.

effort, and I suggest that scholarly follow-up is necessary.

OBJECTIFYING LIFESTYLE, ALTERNATIVE, EXTREME, ACTION, & OUTDOOR CHALLENGE "SPORTS"

Why would someone want masses of people to essentially take over their preferred activity? If there is joy in the discovery, participants tend to go back to it – which means that they want equipment, sites, acceptance: but not too much. As well, when participants grow older, some want to stay in the activity at any level: in addition to participating at senior levels, many alternative participants have tended to follow the mainstream model, where players become coaches and managers; but in alternative activities, they also become writers for niche magazines, which allow them access to travel and continuing to be around the sport; they become entrepreneurs who fashion new types of equipment or ways to contest their sport; they, like Stacy Peralta, become filmmakers and control the historicizing of their own origination myth. But all of these activities work to nudge their sport towards deeper forms of mass acceptance and commodification.

The definitional terms of lifestyle, extreme and action, alternative, and outdoor challenge and outdoor education all have varied places within the continuum of purely grass-roots and highly commodified. The following consists of just a brief sketch and musings regarding some possibilities for study of these activities.

Arlo Eisenberg, back in the mid-1990s, pointed out that inline skating was different from skateboarding. Skateboarding had a history, had a committed core base, and skateboarders *knew* who they were; but inline skaters, a loosely-created formation (and identity) was literally at the mercy of the multinational corporations, like ESPN. So the *lifestyle "sports"*, stemming from a genuine need to resolve the dissonance of the terms "lifestyle" and "sports", in

many cases acceded to the neoliberal, self-centered commodification model. We only have to witness the way these sports/activities have been studied – with the researchers' privilege dampened (one exception might be something like Joanne Kay and Suzanne Laberge's (2003) diatribe against Warren Miller skiing films) as they travel around the world. The simple act of (classed and privileged) reflexivity on the parts of researchers might go a long way toward exhuming the buried remains of Thorstein Veblen's 1899 classic, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, and creating research lines that examine class, privilege, western privilege, subtle forms of imperialism, and colonization within lifestyle sports (1979 [1899]).

Lifestyle sports, given their aesthetic history, have, at the level of practitioner, a very great chance of resisting commodification. Such activities as windsurfing, sky surfing, parasailing, paragliding, kitesurfing – and more – wall many people out of becoming core members simply because of their cost: for example, at the Raglan (NZ) KiteSurfing website, one may purchase a kitesurfing board ranging from \$799-1399 (NZ); one kite (the Edge 2013 7M) lists at \$1590 (NZ) ("Raglan KiteSurfing" 2013). As in many of these activities, financial considerations limit "core" membership to mere "sampler" membership within the club. In some ways, this is a deliberate, albeit covert, strategy to enhance stratification practices. As a result, commodification of such activities, as signaled by media attention and massification of participation, is relatively low.

However, commodification of the actual lifestyle is quite another thing. Since the mid-1800s, there has been a capitalist move to incorporate the middle class into taste cultures (Cross, 1990), which results in not only an effort towards incorporation of objects, accouterments, and things surrounding these activities, but the commodification of the actual lifestyle itself (cf. Bourdieu, TASTE). While Wheaton (2007), following Redhead, posits a more fluid

approach to the rigid markers of sub-culture, culture and the ilk, the identity issues she discusses also admit to an encroaching commodification process of the very idea of lifestyle (Wheaton, 1998, 2007).

Extreme and action sports have largely become commodified. Of course, this general statement can easily be challenged: many participants at the grass-roots levels have clearly not become commodified. But multi-national media corporations like ESPN and Sky TV have made it their mission to incorporate these kinds of sport activities so that the general public identifies with them as “extreme” or “action” sports forms. And the mere acceptance of the activities as “sports” signifies that the move towards massified incorporation – objectifying both the participant and the activities – has already begun to happen. The word “extreme” itself has been a marketable entity (along with “X”) for nearly twenty years (Rinehart, 1998).

For example, the process of commodification for the same inline skaters that Eisenberg was hailing as lifestyle participants – kids who basically saw inline as a form of transportation, or a way of self-labeling themselves (as a skater), or as a form of active resistance to dominant youth models – back in the 1990s has gone quite a ways farther:

The processes of icon making and commodification are interdependent. In fact, many of the athletes *seek* to become commodities, finding lucrative careers through the process. This process is not unlike a symbiotic relationship, where companies, consumers, and individual athletes alike share (but not equally) in the profits. (Rinehart, 2003: 30)

And now, extreme and action sport (the terms are largely indistinguishable) are considered by most to be accepted mainstream sport activities.

Alternative sports, almost by definition, may remain resistant to the dominant. But it is important to remember that the activities that are loosely defined by the term “alternative” keep

changing. However, the compressed temporal element of contemporary life has impacted upon the time that something truly remains alternative: with both time and space compression, by dint of electronic technological advances and the naturalisation of acceptance of such advances, hot “alternative” activities quickly become recognized and commodified. Sometimes this results in a cycle that resembles a quick fad; other times it means that that which has been alternative becomes mainstream very quickly, only to be replaced by something differently alternative. The public appetite is voracious.

Outdoor challenge and outdoor education models, though often delivered from an institutional (educational) setting, have also fallen into the trap of a vaunted, and relatively unexamined, global neoliberal model where it is up to schools (or private enterprises) rather than government to generate funding. Thus, we see the privatisation of outdoor types of alternative physical activity just about everywhere, and we see schools entering into the marketplace, competing for “customers”, skewing the fundamental democratic impulse that for so long defined public education.

Those within these fields can note some of the aggressive forms of commodification that have occurred within outdoor activities. Privatisation, it seems, only serves to exacerbate the commodification of outdoor education (cf. Humberstone and Stan, 2012; Sandell, 2012). There is resistance, however, and it mostly comes from a reflexive type of delivery of such outdoor-oriented programs (cf. Martin and Leberman, 2004; Sebek, Nd; Wattoo and Brown, 2011).

TIME, TEMPORALITY, AND COMMODIFICATION

Jean Baudrillard, writing from the vast stretches of western deserts in *America*, creates the temporal dimension for the apprehension of this collective flattened affect. He cautions

the reader that, to really get at the feel and sense and heft of travel,

We'd have to replay it all from end to end at home in a darkened room, rediscover the magic of the freeways and the distance and the ice-cold alcohol in the desert and the speed and live it all again on the video at home in real time, not simply for the pleasure of remembering but because the fascination of senseless repetition is already present in the abstraction of the journey. The unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film. (1989: 1)

The initial, primary experience is unassailable: but of course it can be "replayed" in so many ways.

A significant dimension of an appreciation for pleasure, at least as it has been "taught" to the postmodern subject through how we are meant to classify acculturation, everyday experience, even sensory apprehension, relies upon reflection or anticipation. Despite the viral insistence on a contemporary cultural shift towards existentialism – in the products we are steered towards buying, the media we devoutly consume, and so forth – there remains, in everyday lived life, a desire for the past, a hope for the future.

The dream of living existentially leads to a flattened affect. The only exception is within idealized art formations, within already-flattened discourses, in novels and short stories and film and poetry and plastic art and sculpture, where Walter Pater's "hard, gemlike flame [that] maintain[s] this ecstasy" (1966 [1873]: 267) may actually exist. But these dreams of desire, ironically, lead to a postmodern subject position that is, like capitalism itself, never satisfied. And it is not coincidental that this lack of satisfaction occurs in a moment of late capitalism (cf. Andrews, 2004).

Pater suggests that we should live from existential moment to existential moment, "burning always [which will result in] success in life" (*ibid.*). Pater's exhortation does not go so far as to assess a sense of existentialism, realism, or

idealism in his passionate subject, but a postmodern subject would: how do we, for example, assess the degree of "burning" except by comparison with other experiences, past and future?

Simone De Beauvoir, in an interview in 1965, reflected on thinking about lived life – as an existentialist:

When one has an existentialist view of the world, like mine, the paradox of human life is precisely that one tries to *be* and, in the long run, merely exists. It's because of this discrepancy that when you've laid your stake on being – and, in a way you always do when you make plans, even if you actually know that you can't succeed in being – when you turn around and look back on your life, you see that you've simply existed. In other words, life isn't behind you like a solid thing, like the life of a god (as it is conceived, that is, as something impossible). Your life is simply a human life. (in Gobeil, 1965)

In Jay Gatsby's world, created by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the reader is lead to believe that Gatsby is living a life of total satisfaction, his every need met, as admirers flock to his house nearly every weekend: we see him living from heightened moment to heightened moment. But Jay Gatsby is a fictional character. His universe is a created universe. We do not see Gatsby brushing his teeth, sitting waiting for someone overdue to share a cup of coffee, being annoyed with trivia, enjoying the antics of an unselfconscious child at play, being uncertain as to others' meanings. We do not know Gatsby's reaction to these everyday moments because F. Scott Fitzgerald has *selected* – really created – moments of Gatsby's life that tell us a certain story, a story of fallen triumph, a modernist tale that builds a dramatic irony within the reader, that portrays Gatsby as a singularly alone man.

The irony of Gatsby the man is that his *apparent* genuineness masks his actual biography. We find that Gatsby, as he invents himself, has a "heart [that] was in a constant, turbulent riot", and that he comes to believe that "the rock of the world was founded securely on a

fairy's wing" (1953 [1925]: 89). *Gatsby* is a story – a story of appearance *versus* reality. Gatsby the man is a fiction. No one – except in fictions – lives from heightened moment to heightened moment in real time.

And extreme sport, or outdoor challenge, action, lifestyle, whiz, or alternative sport athletes and participants do not either. Fitzgerald intimates that Gatsby had difficulties adjusting to mundane everyday life – except with Daisy. I suggest that these sport participants – to one extent by virtue of expectations of pleasure in part created by media, to another by the insistence of commodification upon themselves, their lifestyles, and their sport – cannot really experience pleasure either.

The very process of contemporary commodification relies on this sense of consumers living for the *now*, within a foreshortened world that, not coincidentally, demands they sanctify the present moment while they simultaneously look back nostalgically at former consumptive practices and anticipate future consumption patterns. In a world framed this way, theirs becomes a flattened world, where ever-increasing possessions lead to ever-increasing desire. This emotional landscape, brought to consumers at least partially by purveyors of commodifications, results, at least emotionally, in a seemingly-passionate, yet realistically-bereft, life experience.

As Fitzgerald writes,

The expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (1953 [1925]: 86-87)

Gatsby, a perceptive man, could only sense, but not know, how the process of object-acquisition had imprisoned him. Many contemporary alternative sport athletes follow a similar pattern.

While film (and for that matter, mediated extreme sport) *can be* "timeless" (Baudrillard,

1989: 1), the constant barrage of "peak experiences" also reduces any actual lived moments that are mundane, boring, repetitive into the receding background. Mundane, day-to-day experiences have their own value, if only to provide relief to the peak moments. The result privileges major occurrences, major events, but, in doing so, paradoxically may flatten the pleasure and enjoyment of everyday experiences.

CONCLUSION

One of the keys to the apparent paradox of participating in extraordinary events of physical skill and yet having this gnawing feeling of malaise is the presence or absence of a temporal element. With time to reflect, the experience itself may take on new pleasurable meaning. But where participants experience and privilege sudden rush over reflexive thinking about the experience; where one moment tumbles atop another, without pause for reflection; where there is a clamor for (a felt need to have) the latest experience to surmount others, without time passing to appreciate, enjoy, intensify, and reflect on the experience: this is where anhedonism takes over in the postmodern subject's life.

It is up to those who commoditize to deliberately compress time, to reduce consumers' sense of historical perspective: in this way, of course, the strategy mirrors capitalism itself. Corporations need to demonstrate more and more profit, more and newer product, *ad infinitum*. Just as casinos in Las Vegas lack clocks in order to influence patrons' conception of time, so too do lifestyle entrepreneurs skew a sense of time to their advantage (cf. Cope and Kalantzis, 1999). This is decidedly an anti-sustainability strategy, meant for the momentary fix, but it does not come from nowhere (cf. Schumacher, 1975).

If we were to compare this sense of compressed time (cf., Kroker, Kroker, and Cook, 1989) to related aspects from a WW-II or

pre-World-War-II generation, we would generally discover a more linear, focused sense within relationships between people. Episodic relationships would still occur, but there would be more connection between individuals, families, communities. Even with the sudden epiphanic moment (for a whole generation) of a sudden traumatic invasion in global war – using tactics of stormtroopers, the blitzkrieg, and the atomic bomb (tactics which devolved into the US Military’s use of “shock and awe” (Ullman and Wade, 1996) and its justification) – there was time *after* to reassess, to mull over, to reflect.

Sometimes relationships happened quickly, but again there was a sense of lastingness as opposed to planned obsolescence. Relationships may have been based more on pragmatic, instrumental goals: courtly love was still a fantasy, not a goal; snap, instantaneous, immediate falling in love, and Hollywood fantasies were only beginning to influence societal attitudes towards real, face-to-face relationships (cf. Lyman, 1987; Denzin, 1991); people dreamed that they could “have it all”, but didn’t truly believe that as a life trajectory. The paradox is that the more postmodern humans clamored for hedonistic pleasure, the more its actual realization receded, like Baudrillard’s objects in the side-view mirror.

Yet the concept of “anhedonia” is not simply about time compression. As Stanford Lyman puts it in his study of fifty years of American film:

“Anhedonia” speaks to a deep and unresolved dilemma in the American *Lebenswelt*. In its penultimate form it expresses itself as a frenzied desire to escape coupled with a recognition that there is no place to go. Nothing is left but sudden, sharp, uncathartic aggressive displays, and then – ultimately – a grudging acquiescence to a life alternating between boredom and frustration. (1987: 264).

This vague sense of an inability to experience pleasure, and the concomitant panicked rush to experience it as quickly, episodically, and

deeply as possible is what constitutes a major facet of the paradoxical nature of contemporarily-lived life. As well, it parallels the strategies of modern and postmodern marketing and advertising campaigns to create uncertainty, need, want, desire in consumers. As this commodification process works its way through not just tangible product but also lifestyle, worldview, and a gnawing sense of self as passive, there is an individual and collective backlash. But like the fly caught in the web, the more we struggle, the more we become enmeshed.

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