

**Media Review: Joe Bowman and Aaron Bartlett
(Directors/Producers), "Gamble", Steel City Media/Creative
Concept**

CHERRINGTON, James

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/24368/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

CHERRINGTON, James (2019). Media Review: Joe Bowman and Aaron Bartlett (Directors/Producers), "Gamble", Steel City Media/Creative Concept. International Review for the Sociology of Sport.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

This is an authors' accepted media review for 'International Review for the Sociology of Sport', copyright Sage Publications

**Media Review: Joe Bowman and Aaron Bartlett
(Directors/Producers), 'Gamble', Steel City Media/Creative Concept.**

Dr. Jim Cherrington, Academy of Sport and Physical Activity, Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Collegiate Hall, Collegiate Crescent, Sheffield, S10 2BP

**Media Review: Joe Bowman and Aaron Bartlett (Directors/Producers),
'Gamble', Steel City Media/Creative Concept.**

Reviewed by: Jim Cherrington, Sheffield Hallam University, UK.

In recent years lifestyle sports and alternative physical activities have become a mainstay of the global cultural milieu. In fact, such is the growth of these activities that many commentators have observed how they are now outpacing participation in traditional sporting forms such as football, cricket, and rugby (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011). As the popularity of lifestyle sports has increased, so too has our scholarly understanding. We now know more about the centrality of, among other things: risk-taking (Brymer, 2013), consumption (Wheaton, 2012), authenticity (McCormack, 2017), 'nature' engagement (Cherrington, Black and Tiller, 2018), spirituality (Taylor, 2007) and embodiment (Allen-Collinson and Leledaki, 2014), as well as the social, cultural and political landscapes against which such activities take place (Fletcher, 2008). Through the groundbreaking, and cross-fertilising work of scholars working under the remit of sociology, cultural studies, (human and physical) geography, philosophy, psychology and physiology we have become well placed to examine, and critically unravel the densely entangled relationships between minds and bodies, humans and nonhumans, agents and structures and people and places as they apply to everyday expressions of practice. It is to these ideas, and the attendant aspects of lifestyle sport that I shall turn to in my review of *Gamble*.

In her analysis of the lifestyle sport landscape, Robinson (2015) calls for caution regarding the presumed extremity of certain activities. For example, in a number of commentaries spanning almost 20 years, Belinda Wheaton (2000;2004;2017) has convincingly illustrated the tensions between the rationalisation of extreme sports through market logic and the need for participants to express alternative, subcultural identities. In exploring this tension, questions have been raised as to the continuing (in) significance of racialised, gendered, aged and class-based affinities within such sports. Sisjord (2015), for instance, points to the persistently patriarchal and misogynist nature of sports such as skating, snowboarding, and surfing, whilst Robinson (2008) highlights the ways in which gendered identities are reconstructed and re-imagined through the sport of climbing, albeit in ways that continually defer to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Finally, Weedon (2016) illustrate how sports such as surfing and mud-running are often premised on conservative, middle-class tropes regarding the body and its proximity with 'nature', in ways that actively subjugate non-white bodies, thus positioning them at the margins. This has led to calls for more work that links identity politics in these sports with broader social and cultural factors, whilst exposing the power and inequalities that emerge both within and between these formations (Wheaton, 2015).

This growing corpus of work draws on a multifarious range of activities, of which board sports such as skateboarding, surfing and windsurfing seem to be disproportionately represented. However, despite an upsurge in popularity over the last few decades (Taylor,

2010), mountain biking remains conspicuous by its absence. Notwithstanding excellent work from the likes of Taylor (2010), Savre et al (2009), Gibbs and Holloway (2018), Brown (2008;2012;2014), and more recently McKewan (2018) and McCormack (2017;2018), we still know very little about the lived, embodied, everyday identities of mountain bikers, or the contexts within which these performances might play out. *Gamble*, therefore, arrives at a critical juncture in mountain bike history, as its synopsis speaks to those practices and forms of personhood that have hitherto been overlooked in existing accounts on the sport:

Steel City Media and Creative Concept bring you the much anticipated new feature film *Gamble*, uniting some of downhill mountain bike racing's most talented and charismatic riders and releasing them from the confines of the tape. With the chips well and truly on the table, get ready to go all in with raw speed, a heavy , and virgin locations. Filmed across the World in locations such as Argentina, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa and featuring a powerhouse lineup including Greg Minnaar, Josh Bryceland, Steve Peat, Loic Bruni and more, this mob of reprobates are not afraid to make some noise (PinkBike, 2018).

Excluding the introduction and epilogue, the film is organised into 10 sections, with each involving at least one of 11 iconic riders from the UCI downhill mountain bike world cup. These include, in order of their appearance: Josh Bryceland and Craig Evans (joint feature), Sam Blenkinsop, Brook McDonald, Fin Isles, Phil Atwill, Steve Peat, Conor Fearon, Greg Minnaar and Mark Wallace. Each section is also cleverly narrated by Alan Ford, who was cast in prominent 90's gangster films: *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrells* and *Snatch*. In keeping with the focus of other, recent mountain bike films such as Dirt's Mountain Bike's trilogy: *A Slice of British Pie* (2016-2018), the emphasis here is on speed and style, with each segment being organised in such a way as to emphasise notions of courage, commitment, enjoyment and creativity. The soundtrack is a significant vehicle for this, as it comprises a fantastic, uptempo playlist of rock, grunge, and vintage pop songs, made to the measure of the riders' personalities.

The first thing to note about this film is the absence of female riders. Despite other films in this genre providing a platform for athletes such as Rachel Atherton, Casey Brown and Tahnee Seagrave, the directors have opted not to follow this trend. To a certain extent, this may be said to reflect the work undertaken by Withers and Livingston (2010), who argue that despite numerous, high profile female successes in the sport, women still have to jostle, often unsuccessfully, with men for media coverage. As a result, such media is often portrayed as a male domain, whereby 'mountain bikes and mountain biking products are to be developed for and used by men' (2010:1209). Indeed, within the film and the accompanying 'behind the scenes' excerpts, there are numerous occasions which depict behaviors that are in keeping with hegemonic masculinity, including exhibitionism, aggressive riding styles, and stoic attitudes towards pain and injury. However, notwithstanding these issues, *Gamble* might otherwise indicate how mountain biking, as an alternative cultural form, is a 'still growing and diversifying body of male and female consumers and participants, from increasingly diverse global geographical settings' (Wheaton, 2015:636). For instance, Steve Peat (44) and Gregg Minaar (37), who feature heavily in the film, represent an older demographic than

those typically featured in traditional sports and sport media, whilst riders such as Josh Bryceland and Craig Evans, as well as Phil Atwill, are well-known for their working-class heritage.

Stylistically, the film exemplifies the subcultural ethic that is said to characterise lifestyle sports cultures more generally (Rinehart, 2003). For instance, in the opening segment, we see Josh Bryceland and Craig Evans 'sessioning' small segments of trail in Louisa, Portugal, in an informal, playful and creative manner. Their riding is relaxed and loose, their language is colloquial, and the flow of the section is continually interrupted by jovial exchanges between the two riders, illustrating mountain bikers' dislike of linear forms of movement (Brown, Dilley and Marshall, 2008). The overall feel of this segment is a testament to the career trajectory of Josh Bryceland, who only 2 years previous to the filming of *Gamble* made the decision to give up a career in competitive downhill racing as the result of his disenchantment with formal competition and increasing regard for the environment. Thus, the insights provided here shed further light on the non-institutional, uncompetitive, and participatory aspects of mountain biking, whilst illustrating how this ethic can lead to meaningful, and 'sensuous' solidarities (Shilling and Mellor, 1997) that extend beyond the sport itself.

Throughout the film, we are also introduced to the various bodily forms upon which this ethic is grounded. Indeed, in my favourite segment of the film, Sam Blenkinsop is seen charging through rooty obstacles and carving through fresh dirt, explicating the unique synergy between mountain biking, enjoyment and 'edgework' (Lyng, 1990), that is, the ability of riders to balance the risks undertaken with a sense of physical accomplishment. Here, the audience is kept on the edge of their seats as Blenkinsop appears barely able to control the bike beneath him, emphatically exploring the muddled edges between bodily and culturally tolerated levels of risk. In an especially intense moment, Blenkinsop canons through the treeline, only to adjust his front wheel in almost impossible fashion and land it in a gap between two rocks. This section elucidates the careful balance that mountain bike riders must strike between deliberated embodied action (i.e caution) and wilful imagination (i.e chance) (Haywood, 2006) in order to master their sport. Equally important in this context are the social and cultural influences that will have conditioned their experiences with such risks. The fact that these are professional riders with lucrative contracts, performing dangerous stunts midway through the competitive season (Brooke McDonald changed teams shortly after *Gamble* was filmed) makes these risks, and the riders relentless pursuit of them, all the more impressive.

Within the film, the producers evoke a number of important 'sensescapes' (Rodaway, 1994) that will appeal to dedicated mountain bike enthusiasts, as well as those with an interest in the lived, sensuous and practical aspects of various dwellings. In Phil Atwill's segment, we are treated to a beautiful marriage of orange and brown colours that typify an Autumnal, Greek woodland. In Blenkinsop's segment, we hear the recognisable 'scraping' sound that emanates from the marriage of tyre and dirt, as well as the joyous, childlike yelps and screams as he jumps and skids around the landscape. And with Loic Bruni, we experience the warm, ethereal colours of the Madeiran dirt as it is set against the Portuguese coastline. All of this, as I have previously mentioned is set to a fantastic soundtrack, which seems to further

enunciate these various affects. What is fascinating here is that these sensescapes are not strictly 'natural' in the romantic sense, but rather born out of the hybrid 'human-body bike' (Brown, 2014: 26), revealing the manifold ways in which humans and non-humans are 'worked together in the production and repro-duction of cyborg or hybrid geographies' (McCormack, 1999: 156). Sport scholars working within the framework or 'New Materialism', Posthumanism, or 'Speculative Realism' will no doubt recognise the significance of these assemblages, as it is suggested that participants who dwell within them might be better positioned to collapse the boundary between humans and nonhumans, leading to a more caring and attentive attitude towards the environment.

The resultant impression is one that represents the 'dialectic between flows and forms, circulations and landscapes, mobility and fixity' that plays out in contemporary cosmopolitan landscapes (Soderstrom, 2006: 557). In casting an international group of riders, riding in a series of global locations of which they are often not natives, the riders could be viewed through a form of 'rooted cosmopolitanism' (Molz, 2006) that rests on a complex tension between the particularity of a local place, on the one hand and a universalistic notion of the global (professional) mountain biker, on the other. As a consequence, athletes such as Loic Bruni (France), Finn Isles (Canada) and Conor Fearon (Australia) appear to be attached to a home of their own, whilst at the same time taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places and people. Of special note, in this regard are the segments with Loic Bruni and Steve Peat, which were developed in consultation with local stakeholders. In the 'behind the scenes' footage pertaining to the former, we learn of how the trail built for this segment was later inherited by the local community, leading to sustained and sustainable use. Whilst with Steve Peat's segment, filmed only a few miles from my own home in Sheffield, we witness the remarkable way in which a disused ski slope, on the site of an old landfill is transformed into a useable, creative and expressive space that facilitates human action and interaction.

There is, therefore, an unmistakable sense of nostalgia that is conveyed throughout this film. In rendering a particular subcultural ethic, accentuating the sensescapes that these evoke and visually performing a sense of rooted mobility, the film concludes with reference to the tragic death in 2016 of another rider, Steve Smith, for whom these aspects of the sport were so central. In the final scene, the producers pay homage to Smith by filming one of his friends, and a suitable epithet of Smith's influence - Mark Wallace, riding on one of Smith's favourite, home-town trails. The segment follows Wallace as he glides through a snowy, moss-filled forest, whilst jumping off jaw-dropping drops in a manner that defies belief. In watching this I am reminded of Brown's (2015: 662) description of mountain bike tracks as: 'marks, residues or remnants left in place by cultural life, which are not only material visible marks...but can also be manifested as practices, emotions, thoughts, memories and non-visual sensations'. The medium of film is also germane here as it carries the unique capacity to convey sporting expressions in a manner that is both anchored in, but free from chronological time. These aspects are helped along with a fitting track from Wolfgang entitled *Lions in Cages* which further entrenches Smith's influence through lyrics such as '*Who's gonna get up after we're gone?*' and '*we don't stop to check the time, cause time keeps*

moving on'. In the end, we are left with a delicate and timeless tribute to someone who was emblematic of the (sub) culture of mountain biking, and whom will doubtless live on through the lifestyles, practices and human-nonhuman relationships that the film is at great pains to elucidate.

References

- Allen-Collinson J and Leledaki A (2014) Sensing the outdoors: a visual and haptic phenomenology of outdoor exercise embodiment. *Leisure Studies*. **34**(4): 457-470.
- Brown K (2012) Sharing public spaces across difference: attunement and the contested burdens of choreographing the encounter. *Social and Cultural Geography*. **13**(7): 801-820.
- Brown K (2014) Spaces of play, spaces of responsibility: Creating dichotomous geographies of outdoor citizenship. *Geoforum* **55**: 22-32.
- Brown K (2015) Leave only footprints? How traces of movement shape the appropriation of space *Cultural Geographies*. **22**(4): 659-687.
- Brown M. K Dilley R and Marshall K (2008) Using a Head-Mounted Video Camera to Understand Social Worlds and Experiences. *Sociological Research Online*. **13**(6).
- Brymer E (2013) The search for freedom in extreme sports: A phenomenological exploration. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. **14**:865-873.
- Cherrington J Black J and Tiller N (2018) "Running away from the taskscape: ultramarathon as 'dark ecology'." *Annals of Leisure Research*. [online first].doi:[10.1080/11745398.2018.1491800](https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2018.1491800)
- Fletcher R (2008) Living on the edge: The appeal of risk sports for the professional middle class. *Sociology of Sport Journal* **25**(3): 310-330.
- Gibbs D and Holloway L (2018) From experience economy to experience landscape: The example of UK trail centres. *AREA*. **50**(2): 248-255.
- Gilchrist P and Wheaton B (2011) Lifestyle sport, public policy, and youth engagement: examining the emergence of parkour. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* **3**(1): 109-131.
- Gilchrist P and Wheaton B (2017) The social benefits of informal and lifestyle sports: a research agenda. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* **9**(1): 1-10.
- Haywood I (2006) Climbing Monsters: Excess and Restraint in Contemporary Rock Climbing. *Leisure Studies* **25**(4): 455-467.
- Huybers-Withers S and Livingston L.(2010) Mountain biking is for men: consumption practices and identity portrayed by a nice magazine. *Sport in Society* **13**(7/8): 1204-1222.

- Lyng S (1990) Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking. *American Journal of Sociology* **95**(4): 851-886.
- McCormack D (1999) Body Shopping: reconfiguring geographies of fitness. *Gender, Place, and Culture - A Journal of Feminist Geography* **6**(2): 155-177.
- McCormack K (2017) Inclusion and Identity in the Mountain Biking Community: Can Subcultural Identity and Inclusivity Coexist? *Sociology of Sport Journal* **34**(4): 344-353.
- McCormack K (2018) Building community online and on the trail: communication, coordination, and trust among mountain bikers. *Information, Communication, and Society* **21**(4): 564-577.
- McKewan K (2018) Differentiating Identities Within an Extreme Sport: A Case Study of Mountain Biking Print Advertisements. *Frontiers in Psychology* **9**: 1-15.
- Mei-Dan O Monasterio E Carmont M and Westman A (2013) "Fatalities in wingsuit BASE jumping. *Wilderness Environ Med* **24**(4): 321-327.
- Molz J (2006) Cosmopolitan Bodies: Fit to Travel and Travelling to Fit. *Body and Society*. **12**(3): 1-21.
- Rinehart R (2003). *To the extreme: alternative sports, inside and out*. Albany: SUNY.
- Robinson V (2008) *Everyday Masculinities and Extreme Sport: Male Identity and Rock Climbing*. Oxford: Berg.
- Robinson V (2015) Extreme leisure: the case of extreme sporting activities. In Blackshaw T (ed) *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*. London: Routledge, pp.506-521.
- Rodaway P (1994) *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense, and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Savre F Saint-Martin J and Terret T (2009) An Odyssey Fulfilled: The Entry of Mountain Biking into the Olympic Games. *Olympika XVIII*: 121-136.
- Shilling C and Mellor P (1997) *Re-Forming the Body: Religion, Community and Identity*. London: Sage.
- Sisjord M S (2015) Assessing the sociology of sport: on lifestyle sport and gender. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. **50**(4-5): 596-600.
- Soderstrom O (2006) Studying Cosmopolitan Landscapes. *Progress in Human Geography* **30**(5): 553-558.
- Taylor B (2007) Surfing into Spirituality and a New, Aquatic Nature Religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* **75**(4): 923-951.
- Taylor S (2010) Extending the Dream Machine: Understanding People's Participation in Mountain Biking. *Annals of Leisure Research* **13**(1-2): 259-281.

Weedon G (2016) On the entangled origins of mud-running: overcivilization, physical culture, and overcoming obstacles in the Spartan Race. In Bridel W Markula P and Denison J (eds) *Endurance Running: A socio-cultural examination*. London, Routledge, pp.35-50.

Wheaton B (2000) Just Do It: Consumption, Commitment, and Identity in the Windsurfing Subculture. *Sociology of Sport Journal* **17**: 254 - 274.

Wheaton B (2004) *Understanding lifestyle sports: consumption, identity, and difference*. London/New York: Routledge.

Wheaton B (ed). (2012). *The Consumption and Representation of Lifestyle Sports*. London: Routledge.

Wheaton, B. (2015). "Assessing the sociology of sport: On action sport and the politics of identity." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. **50**(4-5). 634-639.