

**“Life can be a Little Bit Fluffy”: Survival Television, Neoliberalism and the Ambiguous
Utopia of Self-preservation**

Joe P.L. Davidson

Abstract

This article examines the utopian imaginary of two survival television shows: *Born Survivor* and *Extreme Survival*. These programmes focus on the attempts by survival experts Bear Grylls and Ray Mears to remain alive in the wilderness. After considering the place of survival television in the history of nature documentaries and its articulation of a “primitive” form of masculinity, it is argued that the genre elaborates a neoliberal form of utopia. Survival television dovetails with the shadowy side of neoliberalism, ennobling a precarious, self-punishing mode of existence in which one struggles to maintain one’s present position rather than improve it. Yet, drawing on a widely shared meme featuring Grylls, I conclude by suggesting that the conservative effect of survival television is tempered by the exaggerated nature of Grylls’s performance, which offers a glimpse into how survival might be perceived from a genuinely utopian future.

Keywords

Bear Grylls, nature documentaries, neoliberalism, Ray Mears, reality television, survival, utopia

Publication Information

Davidson, J. P. L. (2019) “‘Life Can Be a Little Bit Fluffy’: Survival Television, Neoliberalism, and the Ambiguous Utopia of Self-preservation’, *Television & New Media*. doi: [10.1177/1527476419854202](https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419854202).

Bear Grylls, the television survival expert famous for shows such as *Born Survivor* (2006-2011) and *The Island* (2014-), was interviewed by *Men's Health* in March 2018 to promote his new Facebook Watch show *Face the Wild* (2018-). The interviewer promises that readers will be offered some 'unexpected wilderness tips' from Grylls (Mancuso 2018). It transpires that the main piece of advice in the interview is that a way to keep warm in cold climates is to hold excrement in the hand: 'What we used to do in the military was to poo into a little thing of plastic wrap, like you would find in a kitchen [...] Then we'd wrap it up and pass it around to keep our hands warm' (Mancuso 2018). This tip, however disgusting, is hardly "unexpected". Grylls, since he first appeared on our screens in the mid-2000s, has revelled in the repulsive. *Born Survivor*, a goldmine for listicle writers, advises viewers to drink elephant dung, sleep in a camel carcass and turn a dead seal into a wetsuit (Wightman 2015). Grylls's association with the grotesque is such that when a meme emerged in 2010 featuring his face accompanied by the words 'The sun is going down/Better drink my own piss', it was widely shared (Know Your Meme n.d.).

Grylls has not been alone in the promotion of wilderness survival skills. Since the turn of the millennium, reflecting and reinforcing broader cultural shifts towards strenuous forms of physicality (from extreme sports to "military fitness"), there has been an upsurge in the number and popularity of television programmes focussed on demonstrating to the viewer how to survive in the wilderness with minimal help from other humans or advanced technology. Alongside Grylls's programmes, prominent examples of survival television include Ray Mears's *Extreme Survival* (1999-2002), Les Stroud's *Survivorman* (2005-2015), Mykel Hawke and Ruth England's *Man Woman Survival* (2010-2012), and Cody Lundin and Dave Canterbury's *Dual Survival* (2010-2016). Each of these shows is fronted by a survival expert who ventures into remote wildernesses with the aim of avoiding death through the deployment of a variety of bushcraft skills. The natural world presents a series of dangers and

challenges to the expert, who is often forced to engage in ever more extreme acts in order to overcome the forces of nature. While beginning with demonstrations of straightforward skills such as making a fire and building a makeshift shelter, survival television often culminates in the kind of grotesque acts for which Grylls is best known.

The entwinement of the act of survival with the painful, unpleasant and humiliating is central, I argue in this article, to understanding the place of survival television in the cultural imaginary. Building on previous work on neoliberalism and reality television (see Couldry, 2008; Grazian 2010; McCarthy 2007; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Redden 2018), this article aims to understand survival television as offering an ambiguous neoliberal form of utopia, with the indignities undergone by the survival expert chiming with the emphasis on the precarious, individual and competitive struggle for self-preservation as a model of human fulfilment in neoliberalism. To make this case, I offer a detailed analysis of Bear Grylls's *Born Survivor*, first broadcast on Channel 4, and Ray Mears's *Extreme Survival*, first broadcast on the BBC, and, in particular, the first seasons of both of these shows. *Born Survivor* and *Extreme Survival*, as early examples of survival television, played an important role in defining and shaping the genre, and thus offer a useful lens through which to explore the utopian imaginary of contemporary survivalism. Furthermore, the differences between Grylls and Mears are instructive regarding the utopian function of survival television, with Grylls's exaggerated and excessive performance of survivalist subjectivity contrasting with Mears's more sedate and constrained approach to the task of survival.

I begin with a brief genealogy of survival television, tracing the origins of the relationship between survivalism and the visual image to a tradition of documenting nature that begins with camera hunters in the late nineteenth century and stretches through to Steve Irwin's adversarial mode of nature filmmaking in the 1990s. Despite the continuities between

survival television and the nature documentaries that preceded it, there is a crucial difference. While the latter emphasise the great rewards that accrue from the risks faced by the documentary-makers, in the form of otherwise impossible footage, the former foregrounds “survival and survival alone”: Mears and Grylls enter nature for no other end than to demonstrate their ability to postpone death. I then turn to the existing literature on survival television, focussing on the claim that it should be understood in terms of “primitive” masculinity (Champion 2016; Ferrari 2014; Goodridge 2010). This argument, while compelling in a number of respects, struggles to account for the significance of “survival alone” in the programmes of Mears and Grylls, focussing on the continuities rather than discontinuities between survival television and earlier nature documentaries.

To explicate this emphasis on “survival alone” in Mears and Grylls, I explore the relationship between reality television, neoliberal subjectivity and survival television. Drawing on Misha Kavka’s (2012) genealogy of reality television, a number of affinities between survival television, on the one hand, and the neoliberal subjectivity associated with “surveillance” and “personal challenge” reality television programmes, on the other, are identified. Survival television is distinctive insofar as, unlike most reality television, it promises not improvement but rather endless struggle, thus resonating with the shadowy side of neoliberal existence in its emphasis on precarity not security, humiliation not respect, and self-preservation not flourishing. True human existence, for Mears and Grylls, can only be realised through the indignities of survivalism, with their utopia of survival possible in the wilderness and not in the coddling comfort of “civilisation”. The precarious struggle for existence experienced by many people in the contemporary neoliberal moment is recognised and disavowed, represented on screen but denied beyond it.

Yet, by way of conclusion, I suggest that the cultural meaning of the pessimistic utopian imaginary of survival television is ambiguous. Taking my lead from Susan Sontag's (1978) essay on camp, which has recently undergone a revival of interest amongst scholars of reality television (Kavka 2014; Kraszewski 2017; Woods 2014), I argue that the conservative effect of survival television is tempered by the exaggerated nature of Grylls's performance. While not negating the pessimism of survival television, *Born Survivor* – as demonstrated by audience responses such as the “drink your own piss” meme mentioned above – makes manifest the irrationality of survivalist subjectivity and, more tacitly, neoliberal capitalism itself.

A Brief Genealogy: From Camera Hunting to Survival Television

The entwinement of the visual image and the survivalist subject can be traced to late nineteenth century America with the emergence of camera hunting. As Matthew Brower (2005) has explored, this practice involved the deployment of the techniques of hunting with the aim of shooting animals with a camera rather than a gun. The images captured functioned as trophies that could be circulated as symbols of the sportsmanship, prowess and power of photographers, representing their bravery in the face of nature and success in overcoming its challenges. The fact that photographers went into the wilderness armed not with a gun but a camera was testament to their willingness to confront the dangers of the wild without mediation or protection. The practice of camera hunting shaped nature cinematography as it developed in the early twentieth century (Chris 2004; Mitman 1999). The safari film, which reached its height of popularity in the 1920s, focussed on the ability of filmmakers to confront and overcome nature, often in “exotic” settings. While the camera hunters were content with the image as evidence of their prowess, safari films included the dangers faced by the filmmakers in the process of the making of the film on screen, with the filmmakers

depicted as heroically penetrating the wildernesses of the world to collect footage (Russell 1999). The production of images of nature was, in this way, bound up with the threatened body of the filmmaker, the one seemingly impossible without the other.

Such sensationalist depictions of filmmakers engaged in a struggle against nature began to decline in the 1930s (see Chris 2004). The rise of intrepid naturalist presenters in the 1960s, such as Jacques-Yves Cousteau and David Attenborough, who are often observed ‘huffing and puffing’ in their quest to capture a particular animal or habitat, recalled the earlier emphasis on surviving nature (Horak 2001, 470). However, it was not until the 1990s that the sensationalism of the 1920s was fully revived, most obviously with Steve Irwin. In contrast to Cousteau and Attenborough, whose survival is never really at stake on screen, the “adversarial” mode of nature film pioneered in Irwin’s *The Crocodile Hunter* (1996-2007) emphasised the danger posed to the body of the presenter from the animals and environments he encounters (Louw 2006). Irwin, like his camera hunter and safari film forefathers, risks ‘life and limb to get footage’, by wrestling crocodiles to the ground and holding deadly snakes in his bare hands (Chris 2004, 94). *The Crocodile Hunter*, like similar nature documentary series *The Jeff Corwin Experience* (2000-2003) and *Austen Stevens: Snakemaster* (2003-2007), relies on the cultivation of fear to pique the interest of its viewership, with the sense that the presenter is constantly on the edge of peril central to its appeal (Vivanco 2004).

The tendency within nature films to foreground the conflict between the individual human body and the power of nature recurs in survival television. A brief overview of *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor* demonstrates the ways in which these programmes continue the tradition of documenting nature that begins with camera hunting. In *Extreme Survival*, presenter Ray Mears puts himself in the situation of someone caught in the

wilderness with few supplies and minimal tools, and then proceeds to demonstrate how it is possible to remain alive using only the resources of nature. Mears constantly emphasises the dangers of the natural world, commenting in the second episode of the second season that he needs to be able ‘to cope with the worst that nature can throw at us’. We are informed, in every episode, that each decision made in the wilderness is a matter of life and death. Survival is thus gained against nature; it must be eked out through active struggle with a dangerous environment. The emphasis on the danger faced in the process of filming in earlier nature documentaries is taken up in *Extreme Survival*, with the risk of death constantly evoked in Mears’s struggle with nature.

Extreme Survival, in pitting a lone individual against hostile nature without the mediation of community or modern technology, established a generic pattern that would be followed by many survival shows in the 2000s and 2010s, including Bear Grylls’s *Born Survivor*. Like Mears, Grylls charts a solitary path through a variety of wildernesses with the aim of securing his safety. Yet, *Born Survivor* works to purify the genre of survival television. In particular, the programme accentuates the conflict between nature and humanity. The avuncular and ebullient Mears emphasises the importance of possessing bushcraft skills, makes no claim to physical strength and goes about the business of survival at an almost leisurely pace. By contrast, it is the power of Grylls’s body alone that ensures his survival and allows him to thwart the dangers posed by the wilderness. The lithe and brawny Grylls – who states at the beginning of each episode that he will survive with only the clothes he is wearing, a knife and a flint – comes before nature almost naked. Grylls is close to a figure such as Irwin, with his bareness signifying a source of excitement for viewers and indicating that death is an ever-present danger. This is emphasised by formal camera techniques. We frequently see long shots of Grylls surrounded by space, his body small, isolated and engulfed by the wilderness.

The adversarial mode of documentaries such as *The Crocodile Hunter* is thus recalled, with *Born Survivor* positing a zero-sum game between humanity and nature: to remain alive, wild forces have to be physically resisted and degraded. So, while attempting to survive in the Kenyan Savannah in the seventh episode of the first season, Grylls says that he is in ‘the midst of a constant life or death struggle’. Grylls’s words are accompanied by uncomfortable close-up shots of his feet crunching over the bones of dead animals and tense, ominous music. In this way, a sense of menace is cultivated, with the fragility of life in the wilderness made obvious to the viewer. As Grylls comments later in the episode, ‘for some creatures to live, others must die’. For the survival expert, humanity and nature are understood to be tragically and irrevocably split, such that the advancement of human interests necessarily involves entering into an agonistic relationship with the surrounding wilderness (Biro 2005).

Survival television, at its core, is defined by an unadulterated conflict between the solitary individual, stripped to the bare body, and nature, which represents nothing more than a threat to this body. As such, a shift occurs in the movement from Irwin’s adversarial nature films to the survival television of Mears and Grylls; the latter form *builds upon* and *breaks with* the tradition that begins with camera hunting in the late nineteenth century. Explicitly at least, the nature photographers and filmmakers enter the wilderness for a reason beyond survival: the risks faced are necessary in order to secure footage of nature that, in turn, may foster a sense of wonder in the audience and an appreciation of the distinctive powers of the wilderness. By contrast, there is no sense that the dangers faced by Mears and Grylls have any reward beyond that of remaining alive, with the only purpose of their presence in the wilderness that of demonstrating their ability to postpone death. The risks faced do not secure a great reward in the form of a visual image; the single trophy taken from the experience is continued life.

Survival Television beyond “Primitive” Masculinity

The existing literature on survival television has primarily focussed on the relationship between the spectacle of survival offered by Mears and Grylls and the ideal of “primitive” masculinity, in which male identity is formed through contact with an untamed nature situated beyond “civilisation” (Champion 2016; Ferrari 2014; Goodridge 2010). As Matthew P. Ferrari (2014, 220) argues, the survivalist’s cavalier attitude to danger, stoic acceptance of hardship and aggressive displays of physical prowess work to enact two ‘powerful interrelated myths regarding the supposed origins of proper manliness’. First, that ‘masculine regeneration’ is secured through the cultivation of a fearless pioneering disposition (Ferrari 2014, 220). By heading out into the wild, “returning to nature”, the survivalists symbolically free themselves from the domestic sphere and the cloying rules of feminised modern “civilisation”. Second, the bareness of Mears and Grylls, the fact they are depicted entering the wild with few tools and little support, dramatizes the masculine ideal of self-reliance. “Real” men, survival television implies, do not need to rely on technological short-cuts or intercommunal support; they are able to face the full force of nature without mediation.

The case for reading survival television as enacting a “primitive” mode of masculinity finds support from the genealogy of the genre discussed above (see Ferrari 2014). As Michael S. Kimmel (1995) demonstrates, the end of the nineteenth century saw the birth of “primitive” masculinity in America, with men entering nature to cultivate a virile and adventurous form of manhood. Camera hunting and safari films provided a means through which this mode of masculinity was articulated and expressed (Brower 2005; Mitman 1999). The turn-of-the-century centrality of Theodore Roosevelt, the most famous propagandist of strenuous masculinity, to the development of both camera hunting and safari films neatly

demonstrates the close relationship between “primitive” masculinity and the generic origins of survival television (Brower 2005; Kimmel 1995; Mitman 1999). Irwin’s ‘stereotypically rough-and-tumble Australian masculinity’, with his patriarchal authority over the animals he encounters, confirms this entwinement (Chris 2004, 94). Furthermore, “primitive” masculinity also allows us to understand survival television as a response to recent social and economic changes. The rise of aggressive televisual displays of masculinity such as those enacted in survival television can be understood as a response to the partial loss of traditional modes of masculinity in the context of deindustrialisation and the successes – however partial and precarious – of feminism (Alexander and Woods, 2018). In this context, survival television offers a ‘surrogate masculinity’ whereby men can nostalgically return to physically rigorous forms of manhood associated with a past age (Champion 2016, 242).

However, the claim that survival television *only* articulates a “primitive” mode of masculinity has been contested. For example, Ferarri (2014) and Jared Champion (2016) suggest that survival television *both* embodies and subverts “primitive” masculinity, with Ferrari emphasising the importance of parodies of the survivalist ethos in contemporary culture (a point I return to below) and Champion tracing the subtle ways in which survival television incorporates postfeminist and post-closet sensibilities (see Becker 2007; Lotz 2014). There is an alternative reason why “primitive” masculinity is insufficient in and of itself for understanding survival television. The emphasis on the “return to nature” and individual self-reliance in “primitive” modes of masculinity certainly resonates with Mears’s and Grylls’s performances. Yet, what is less clear is how the characteristic elements of “primitive” masculinity relate to the emphasis on “survival and survival alone” in *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor*. As indicated in the previous section, while the “return to nature” and self-reliance elements are common to camera hunting, safari films and Irwin-like adversarial films as well as survival television, what is distinctive about survival television is

its emphasis on survival without reward. If survival television is understood purely in terms of “primitive” masculinity, it is unclear why survival is a *secondary* concern in shows such as *The Crocodile Hunter* (that aim, at least explicitly, to depict nature) and *the primary* concern of *Born Survivor*. Both programmes allow for the articulation of a “primitive” mode of masculinity, but it is only in the latter that survival itself is central.

To reinforce this point, it is worth briefly turning to a sub-genre of reality television focussed on celebrating ‘the heroism of the blue-collar worker’ (Fleres and Dixon 2011, 580). *Deadliest Catch* (2005-) and *Gold Rush* (2010-) depict groups of men, fishermen and miners respectively, battling with nature. The virility and toughness of the men is constantly stressed, suggesting that only “real men” could cope with the extreme physical stresses of the work depicted (Fleres and Dixon 2011). In terms of the “primitive” masculinity thesis, these shows are very similar to survival television. Both are concerned with defining masculinity in terms of an ability to confront the full force of nature. Yet, the blue-collar heroism sub-genre emphasises that, though the men featured face great dangers, they do so for good reasons, with the pecuniary rewards that accrue from a willingness to undertake the work constantly stressed. The stars of these shows are ‘hard-working “everymen” who aspire to the American Dream’, hoping for betterment rather than mere survival (Kirkby 2013, 109). By contrast, the survivalists enter nature with the sole aim of demonstrating how to remain alive; the hardships, dangers and indignities they confront have no other function than this.

The Utopia of Self-Preservation, Failed Neoliberalism and Cruel Pessimism

While “primitive” masculinity goes a long way in terms of helping us to understand the place of survival television in the contemporary cultural imaginary, there remains a need to account for the “survival alone” ethos of shows such as *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor*. To this end, it is first worth reflecting on the place of survival television *vis-à-vis*

the tradition of reality television. Survival television has taken on a number of the generic tropes of reality television as it developed in the 1990s and 2000s, with Andrew Goodridge (2010) describing it as a “nature-reality” hybrid. Misha Kavka’s (2012) genealogy of reality television is of particular use in understanding this imbrication of survival and reality television. The artificial yet unscripted nature of the survival situations depicted in *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor* evoke the ‘surveillance formats’ of shows such as *Big Brother* (2000-2018) (Kavka 2012: 11). Indeed, the challenges faced by Grylls often take the form of a game; we are told that he must find “civilisation” in a set number of days, mimicking the competitive structure of the surveillance format, albeit with non-human adversaries. The viewer is also frequently reminded by Grylls of how many days he has been in the wilderness, recalling the way *Big Brother* is punctuated by the phrase “its day X in the house”. Furthermore, the pedagogical tone of the survival experts suggests an affinity with ‘personal challenge’ programmes, including makeover and life intervention shows, oriented towards ‘self-improvement and self-transformation’ (Kavka 2012: 11). While survival television, unlike many programmes in the personal challenge sub-genre, does not feature members of the public, the advice offered by Mears and Grylls is addressed didactically to the viewer. Both presenters, at a certain point in each episode, talk directly into the camera to give step-by-step lessons on wilderness skills. This is invariably accompanied by close-up images of the survivalists at work, implying that the viewer can learn new skills from the programme through copying the actions of Mears and Grylls. To bring these moments together, we can say that survival television offers a laboratory of subjective transformation, or a controlled environment that acts as a stage for a normatively exemplary personal change.

This affinity between survival and reality television is significant given the strong neoliberal tendency of reality television. As others have argued at length, reality television works as a technology of the self, encouraging viewers to adopt a competitive entrepreneurial

subjectivity, rely on themselves and spurn collective social support (Couldry, 2008; Grazian 2010; McCarthy 2007; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Redden 2018). This neoliberal tendency is evident in both the surveillance and personal challenge formats identified by Kavka. So, the archetypal surveillance show *Big Brother*, as Nick Couldry (2008) argues, mimicked the behavioural norms of the neoliberal workplace by emphasising the need to demonstrate personal authenticity, the positive power of competition and the ultimately individual basis of success and failure. In a similar fashion, personal challenge shows posit that social problems – from unemployment to obesity – can be traced to individual behaviour rather than broader social and economic structures. Consequently, if people dress better, alter their diet, and change their attitude to life, they will “succeed” (McMurria 2008; Ouellette and Hay 2008; Vander Schee and Kline 2013). Mears and Grylls, it might seem, simply extend this logic to survival itself, indicating that life is a matter of personal responsibility. As noted above, the emphasis in both *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor* is on how the individual can remain alive in the wilderness. For example, in *Born Survivor*, we are informed that Grylls is not allowed to have any contact with his film crew unless his life is in immediate danger and, in a manner similar to the “confessional” scenes of reality television, Grylls is sometimes presented as being completely alone, holding the camera in his hand and filming himself as he directly addresses the audience (Kavka 2012). There is no suggestion that wider sources of social support will be useful in the task of competing with nature for survival; instead, it is the lone surviving subject that is privileged.

Yet, there is a significant difference between the neoliberal logic of reality television and that of survival television. For the most part, the participants in reality television, as Guy Redden (2018, 1) comments, are offered the ‘hope of attaining extraordinary rewards’ as recompense for their efforts to recalibrate themselves. The surveillance format suggests that, by cultivating an authentic version of the self in competition with others, there will be the

possibility of eventually gaining fame: through engagement with the game one has the chance, however slim, of crossing the threshold into celebrity. Personal challenge shows, similarly, teach that taking responsibility for oneself will result in an improvement in life: a prestigious job, an ideal home, a beautiful body and so forth. By contrast, survival television promises much less than this. As noted above, there is no hope of great recompense but simply the *continuation* of life and the *postponement* of death. So, when Mears is teaching us to survive in Arctic conditions, he emphasises that ‘in temperatures like these, one small mistake, like losing a glove, can cost you your fingers with frostbite or, even worse, your life’ (Season 1, Episode 2). In other words, the best that can be expected from an unadulterated encounter with nature is keeping one’s body intact.

Moreover, survival television suggests that something is lost in the encounter with nature; it is not only the case that the act of remaining alive brings no great rewards but, in fact, it necessitates a stripping away of aspects of the self. The ‘marriage of self-preservation and self-sacrifice’, as Max Horkheimer (2004, 88) comments of the modern condition, is evident in the way in which the survival situations imagined in *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor* are introduced. The scenarios posited by Grylls and Mears often centre on the idea of “enjoyment gone wrong”. At the beginning of both shows, we are informed that millions of pleasure-seekers visit the wilderness to enjoy activities such as hiking, fishing, skiing and so on. However, many of these pleasure-seekers, we are also told, never return. Grylls, at the start of an episode focussed on the Sierra Nevada mountains, informs viewers that ‘five million rafters, hikers and climbers come here every year, but each year two hundred end up in serious trouble’ (Season 1, Episode 6). This comment is accompanied by a montage of dynamic footage depicting the kind of dangers faced – falling rocks, steep mountain faces, and fast rivers – with dramatic, bass-heavy music reinforcing the sense of foreboding.

Furthermore, both *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor* are punctuated by “sobering stories” of individuals who have entered the wild looking for pleasure and failed to survive. For example, Mears, in the first episode of the first season of *Extreme Survival*, reports on a ‘sad story’ of a married couple who visited the Costa Rican rainforest. After the wife twisted her ankle, her husband set out to find help. However, Mears recounts, he made a ‘critical error’, forgetting to note down his wife’s exact location so that by the time rescue arrived she was dead. In this scene, Mears’s mastery and control is emphasised by the fact that he is held securely within the frame, depicted sitting comfortably by a fire he has made, as well as by the calm and measured way in which he tells the story. In other words, these “sobering stories” position the viewer as naïve, in need of teaching by figures who have already succeeded in abandoning the pleasure-seeking aspects of the self in order to focus on “survival alone”.

Stories of “enjoyment gone wrong” suggest that there is a need for a subjective transformation when one enters the wild; the pleasure-seeking disposition of the tourist must be replaced by the self-preserving disposition of the survivor. The pleasure-seeker approaches nature for something other than bare survival, entering the wild in order to experience leisure, enjoyment, beauty, wonder and so on. Indeed, the activities that have the potential to “go wrong” often have no purpose beyond themselves; they are pursued for their own sake and contribute nothing tangible to the end of self-preservation. However, survival television implies that these aspects of the self must be jettisoned when something goes awry. Indeed, the survival situation is posited as a punishment for enjoyment; to enter into a wilderness with a purpose other than self-preservation is reckless and being forced to abandon such extraneous desires is the consequence. Recklessness can only be rectified by an extended and unmediated confrontation with the dangers of the wild.

The sense that something is lost in this subjective movement towards survivalism is explicitly thematised in *Born Survivor*. In the first episode of the first season, Grylls is depicted looking drained after spending three days in the wilderness. Almost ruefully, against a backdrop of footage of a jaded Grylls walking aimlessly and accompanied by soft percussive music, he informs the viewer that there is no opportunity to appreciate the beauty of nature in moments of survival: ‘It’s strange how you pass the time when you are lost in the wilderness, you don’t really take in the beauty or the grandeur of the Rockies, all the reasons most people come here in the first place’. Grylls thus acknowledges the intrinsic value of the wilderness that surrounds him but is quick to remind the viewer that this is a distraction from the task of survival: ‘If I can make myself stop and look it’s simply breath-taking, but right now I only want one thing: to keep moving as fast as I can so I can reach a road and safety’. The movement towards the survivalist disposition in which pleasure and joy are renounced in favour of a strict focus on preserving life involves the recognition that the choice before the individual is one of survival or death: the wilderness expert will either overcome nature or succumb to its power. This is what drives the survivalist to ever more undignified acts of the type highlighted by the “drink my own piss” meme mentioned above.

The subjectivity articulated by survival television encompasses a utopian strain, albeit of a very particular sort. This utopianism comes to the fore in the way in which Mears and Grylls imagine the world beyond the wilderness. A particularly significant example of this occurs in Season 1, Episode 1 of *Born Survivor*. A dirty and exhausted Grylls, in one of the “confessional” scenes mentioned above in which he directly addresses the audience and appears to film himself, reflects in a hesitating manner on what drives him to remain alive when the situation is bleak and hopeless: ‘People often talk about the survival instinct, it’s something all of us have, but not necessarily everybody finds, and I think sometimes life can be a little bit fluffy and we don’t have that need to stay alive, but it is something that is within

us all.’ The image of “fluffiness” connotes a sense of softness, comfort and relaxation. The society beyond the wilderness coddles individuals by enveloping them in a world where there is no roughness, hardness or pain. By disavowing the survival instinct and making life too easy, society represses something essential about humanity: the drive to persevere in the face of hostile, powerful forces. Grylls indicates that the survival instinct is denied in the modern world, meaning that many people have never had to test themselves in situations of danger. All of this is given additional power by virtue of the intimacy of the scene: we see Grylls alone in a close-up, which, combined with his “confessional” mode of address, suggests that he is disclosing a great secret about survival.

As such, the implication is that there is something powerfully alluring about survival situations. This is clear at the end of the first episode of the first season of *Extreme Survival*. Having successfully overcome the hostile forces of the Costa Rican rainforest, Mears says: ‘If you know what you are doing, survival needn’t be an ordeal, I find it exhilarating here because the jungle offers such an abundance of natural resources to work with’. The closing scene as a whole suggests liberation, with Mears’s comment accompanied by uplifting electronic music and a long shot of him moving slowly down a river on a raft he has constructed himself: the wilderness provides for a kind of release. Mears’s struggles with nature, his subduing of the impulses that transcend “survival alone”, reveals a more authentic mode of existence than that which can be found in “civilisation”, the discovery of which is both exciting and freeing. True human fulfilment, this implies, is found in contexts where the struggle for existence is heightened.

All of this is reinforced by the sense of constant activity evoked by the narrative structure of survival television. Each episode of *Extreme Survival* and *Born Survivor* is comprised of a series of problems that the survivalists must overcome. So, in an episode of

Born Survivor focussed on surviving in Alaska, Grylls must find a way off the avalanche-prone mountain upon which he has been dropped, navigate his way through a forest inhabited by killer bears, climb down an icy waterfall, catch migrating salmon, create a signal fire, row along the coast in a leaky boat, and finally catch the attention of a passing motorboat (Season 1, Episode 4). Each scene, along with the episode as a whole, involves a movement from crisis to triumph, with Grylls overcoming challenges in order to secure his safety. This process of continual overcoming suggests that the wilderness is a place where the full intellectual and physical capacities of the individual can be exercised, in contrast to the “fluffy” world beyond. The sense of ceaseless activity is also evoked by the fact that Grylls is often filmed with a hand-held camera, with all the jerkiness this implies, and the opening montage of each episode of *Born Survivor*, which splices together a succession of short, shaky images of Grylls’s battle with nature.

Even the more relaxed moments of survival television involve activity and movement. For example, the scenes focussed on the detailed demonstration of wilderness skills are generally comprised of long duration, stable close-ups, which contrast with the jolting camerawork that defines much survival television. The slow pace of these scenes provides an occasion for the survivalists to demonstrate their ability to engage in careful and meticulous work with natural resources. The deployment by Mears and Grylls of a broad range of skills and knowledge in the action of subordinating nature to human needs results in a sense of satisfaction; resistant nature is overcome and the survivalists triumph.

The utopia of self-preservation thus makes a critical claim on contemporary society. Mears and Grylls highlight what is wrong with the world as it exists by presenting a new mode of existence predicated on the self-punishing pursuit of survival. The survivalist utopia, as Robert C. Elliott (1970, 22) argues more generally, ‘wears a Janus-face’ insofar that, in

advancing ‘a standard, a goal’, it works to cast ‘a critical light on society as presently constituted’. The utopia is addressed to the conjuncture from which it emerged and makes demands on this conjuncture: danger in the place of safety, hardness in the place of softness, action in the place of relaxation and so on. A lack is revealed in modern “civilisation”, which fails to provide occasions for the testing of the survival instinct against the hostile forces of nature and, instead, cloy the individual with social mores, communal bonds and technological shortcuts. The return to the wilderness, and the stripping down of subjectivity, holds the possibility of freedom.

On this basis, it is possible to return to the relationship between survival television and neoliberalism. As suggested above, survival television departs from the general neoliberal tendency of reality television in its depiction of a self-punishing subject. Yet, the mode of subjectivity enacted in survival television – with its concatenation of self-preservation and self-sacrifice – resonates with the deprivations and struggles experienced by people under present neoliberal social and economic structures. Turner Prize-winning artist Grayson Perry’s comment on Grylls, in an interview with the *Radio Times* to promote his documentary *All Man* (2016), is instructive here: ‘He celebrates a masculinity that is useless. Try going into an estate agent in Finsbury Park and come out with an affordable flat. I want to see Bear Grylls looking for a decent state school for his child!’ (Webb 2016). Now, on the one hand, Perry is right. Knowing how to survive in the wilderness is not terrifically useful compared to the ability to negotiate the complex economic and bureaucratic structures of the modern world. Yet, on the other hand, Perry posits that life in the contemporary moment is still essentially about survival; the struggle people face in relation to education and housing is focussed on self-preservation and maintaining a particular quality of life. The humiliations and indignities undergone by Mears and Grylls are not so distant, in form if not content, from the entrepreneurial subjects of neoliberalism. Although the particular mode of survival

presented in *Born Survivor* and *Extreme Survival* is alien, survival as such is still necessary. Survival television thus dovetails with the shadowy realities of neoliberalism, in which the removal of social support results, for many people, not in a radically improved life but instead in an intensified struggle to maintain the life that they already have.

Survivalism recognises the failed promise of neoliberalism: precarity is a more likely consequence of becoming “responsible” than success. This recognition does not, however, result in a critique of precarity. Instead, Mears and Grylls valorise the state of individual struggle common to both survival situations and neoliberalism; they ennoble a life lived on the edge, with all the stresses and strains this implies, as a mode of human fulfilment. This, the utopian moment of survival television, is why it offers something quite distinct from other reality television shows focused on self-improvement. To borrow Lauren Berlant’s (2011) phrase, reality television often inspires a sense of cruel optimism insofar that it promises that a better life is possible but for many people, however responsibly they behave, this better life never arrives and constantly disappears over the horizon. Survival television recognises this, speaking to those who experience – or fear experiencing – the precarity of the struggle to exist without social support. It presents the state of precarity not as something wrong or unjust but as a desirable state of being; the breaking through of the cloying “fluffiness” of supportive social bonds inspires a sense of exhilaration.

In this way, a cruel pessimism is offered by survival television, which is no less pernicious than Berlant’s cruel optimism. The pessimism of survival television, its sense that life is about nothing beyond self-preservation and all should be sacrificed to this goal, is cruel insofar that it valorises an intolerable situation as the ideal. Rather than neoliberal reality being confronted with an ideal that piques it to go beyond itself, the cruel pessimism of survival television, as Horkheimer recognises of ideology (2004, 66), ‘unwittingly facilitates

the elevation of reality to the status of ideal'. Survival television reflects contemporary neoliberalism but also disavows this reflection. "Civilisation" is posited as a realm of rest and relaxation in which authentic life is impossible. The reality of neoliberalism, the fact that many people do not need to enter the wilderness to live a life of struggle, is thus denied. Just as neoliberalism declared that people had been softened up by the welfarist elements of the post-war consensus and a forceful intervention was needed to remake them as economically free subjects, survival television's utopian imaginary implies that life is too easy and a shot of danger is required if human fulfilment is to be achieved (Hall 1988).

In summary, the drive towards an impoverished life – defined by the disavowal of impulses towards joy, beauty and pleasure in favour of the strictly instrumental pursuit of self-preservation – ennobles a solitary mode of existence in which the struggles of life should be born alone. Such an existence is, survival television implies, necessarily more fulfilling than that offered by the "fluffy" modern world, with its coddling sociality and suspicious technological cheats. Survival television's utopian imaginary therefore both recognises and misrecognises neoliberalism. On the one hand, it celebrates the sacrificial struggle common to both survival situations and the precarity of the modern world while, on the other hand, it deems contemporary society too concerned with collective welfare and communal care. The power of survival television is partly contained in the "double-shuffle" of cruel pessimism, which, in ricocheting between spotlighting precarity and casting a shadow over it, works to legitimise the continued existence of deprivation and scarcity (Hall 2005).

"Better Drink My Own Urine": Utopianising Survival Anew

Yet, it would be wrong to say that the survivalist subjectivity embodied by Mears and Grylls remains uncontested in contemporary culture. To bring this article to a close, I would like to highlight the possibility of an alternative, genuinely emancipatory utopian tendency

within survival television. Ferrari has emphasised the extent to which the ideal of “primitive” masculinity has been subject to parody, drawing attention to a number of ironic invocations of the survivalist ethos (Ferrari 2009; Ferrari 2014). A particularly good example of the kind of parodies that survival television has been subject to is a meme focussed on Grylls, mentioned above, that emerged on Reddit in late 2010 (Know Your Meme n.d.). The meme, in its original form, depicts Grylls in a snowy, mountainous landscape looking into the distance with a serious expression on his face. Superimposed on the picture are the words: ‘The sun is going down/Better drink my own piss’ (Know Your Meme n.d.). This meme, in turn, spawned a number of variations on the same theme, including ‘Out of piss/Drink camera man’s piss’ and ‘Unable to pee/Better drink my own...oh God!’ (Know Your Meme n.d.). The joke is, of course, that the solution to almost every difficulty Grylls faces in the wild, however minor, involves doing something repulsive or grotesque in the name of survival. The meme was so widely shared that, in May 2011, Grylls offered his own playful response to it, tweeting that he will ‘have to drink my own pee!’ accompanied by a picture of him drinking from a teacup (Morris 2011).

It is no accident that Grylls, rather than Mears or one of the other, more earnest television survivalists, was subject to this parody. Grylls’s performance in *Born Survivor* is plainly exaggerated, with the extreme dangers he confronts out of proportion with what is necessary or useful in the particular situations in which he finds himself. Grylls’s “lessons” in *Born Survivor* are questionable as survival skills. This much is admitted by Grylls in the second episode of the first season. Dropped in the Moab desert by helicopter, Grylls first intones, tellingly without his characteristic urgency or passion, that the best way to survive if lost in the wilderness is to stay put; one is most likely to stay alive by relying on others to come to the rescue. However, Grylls ignores this advice, leaps off a rocky outcrop, and strides confidently into the desert to begin his quest to return to “civilisation”. Slow motion

footage of Grylls's jump, accompanied by pumping percussive music, reinforce the sense that he is in his element when putting himself in needless danger. It is Grylls's act of disregarding his own sensible advice that sets in motion a humiliating series of events, which culminate, with crushing inevitability, in him urinating in his own shirt before wrapping it around his head to keep cool. So, as the "drink my own urine" meme suggests, part of Grylls's appeal relies on his willingness to humiliate himself in ever more fantastic ways under the cover of the ever more spurious end of survival.

The significance of the audience's "drink my own urine" response to Grylls is ambiguous. Highlighting the silliness of Grylls's survivalism need not mean rejecting survivalism per se and, in fact, can act to confirm it. Counter-memes to the "drink my own urine" meme featuring Mears suggest such a reading. For example, in one, Mears is pictured sitting comfortably on a luscious green slope, and the words 'Thirsty/Better find a safe source of water' are superimposed over this image (Cheezburger n.d.). The meme attests to the sense that Mears's sedate and ponderous style of survival, which eschews the sensationalism of Grylls, is exemplary. Indeed, Mears himself has asserted that the extreme bodily risks that Grylls faces mean that he is not a true survivalist but a mere 'showman' (Barkham 2008). Grylls's style of survival is rejected only in order to recuperate the self-punishing subjectivity at the core of survival television. That is, the Mears counter-memes indicate the possibility of a rational mode of survival and, implicitly, confirm the conservative utopianism of survival television.

Yet, the "drink my own urine" meme also implies that there is a critical dimension to Grylls's performance. The meme highlights, as odd as it might seem for a genre so associated with traditional modes of masculinity, the campness of survival television. Susan Sontag (1978, 275), in her famous essay on camp, comments that the 'essence of Camp is its love of

the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration'. Grylls's over the top displays of survival demonstrate a delight in the playful, with his concern not with the earnest education of his audience in the finer points of woodcraft but rather the theatrical display of excessive survivalist behaviour. The extravagant spirit of Grylls's campiness functions to 'dethrone the serious', demonstrating the artificiality of venerated standards through mimicry (Sontag 1978, 288). In other words, the manifest silliness of Grylls's behaviour – his 'exaggerated, knowing performance' of survivalist tropes – creates an ironic distance between the viewer and the utopia of self-preservation, suggesting that there is something amiss about the survivalist ethos of contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Kavka 2014, 56). Grylls's class background makes him a particularly suitable figure to perform this comic version of neoliberal utopianism. His deep roots in the quasi-feudal British establishment – the son of a Conservative MP who was educated at Eton College and served in the elite Special Air Service – give him an aristocratic disdain for the daily slog of neoliberal existence (see Grylls 2012). From this position, Grylls can adopt a libertine-like attitude to the task of survival; it is something to be played or dabbled with but not taken too seriously.

Grylls, in this way, lags behind the times; there is a disjuncture between his old-fashioned patrician tendency towards rakishness and the contemporaneous neoliberal utopia of self-preservation. As Ernst Bloch (1991) recognised, such mixing of different temporal elements has a radical potential. The tension in Grylls's performance between impishness and seriousness, the non-synchronous coming together of aristocratic excess and neoliberal constraint, anticipates the possibility of a world in which survivalism would represent no more than a quirky spectacle of people innocently playing in nature, with everyone in on the joke that there is nothing at stake, no longer pointing to anything beyond itself and having no use apart from the enjoyment the audience takes in the display. Grylls's exaggerated performance implicitly asks us to imagine a world where we might all have the luxury of

distance from the survivalist ethos; a society in which scarcity and precarity have been overcome, and everyone can entertain a playful disdain for the spectacle of survival. In other words, within the excesses of survival television, we are presented a glimpse of how survival might be perceived from a future world where Theodor Adorno's (2005) minimal utopian standard has been reached: no one goes hungry. It offers us a view of survival from a genuinely utopian world, rather than the distorted utopia of self-preservation that defines the neoliberal present. There is thus a moment of hope, albeit fragile, in the self-punishment of the survival expert.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their instructive and insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article, and Charlotte Barnard for her invaluable comments on the aesthetics of survival television.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J500033/1].

References

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2005. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso.
- Alexander, Susan M. and Katie Woods. 2018. "Reality Television and the Doing of Hyperauthentic Masculinities." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, in press. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1060826518801529>.
- Barkham, Patrick. 2008. "Out of the Woods." *The Guardian*, October 13. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/oct/13/television-wildlife>.
- Becker, Ron. 2007. "Post-closet Television." *Flow TV*, November 16. <http://flowtv.org/2007/11/post-closet-television/>.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Biro, Andrew. 2005. *Denaturalizing Ecological Politics: Alienation from Nature from Rousseau to the Frankfurt School and Beyond*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bloch, Ernst. 1991. *Heritage of Our Times*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Brower, Matthew. 2005. "Trophy Shots: North American Photographs of Nonhuman Animals and the Display of Masculine Prowess." *Society & Animals* 13 (1): 13-31.
- Champion, Jared. 2016. "Survivor Shows and Caveman Masculinity." *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* 4 (1/2): 240-258.
- Cheezeburger, n.d. "Rational Ray Mears." <https://cheezeburger.com/6493907200>.
- Chris, Cynthia. 2004. *Watching Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Couldry, Nick. 2008. "Reality TV, or the Secret Theater of Neoliberalism." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30 (1): 3-13.
- Elliott, Robert C. 1970. *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ferrari, Matthew P. 2009. "Primal Giggles: Thoughts on Reality Television's Recent Pieties and Parodies of the "Masculine Primitive.""
Flow TV, September 9. <http://www.flowjournal.org/2009/09/primal-giggles-thoughts-on-reality-television%E2%80%99s-recent-pieties-and-parodies-of-the-%E2%80%9Cmasculine-primitive%E2%80%9D-matthew-ferrari-university-of-massachusetts-amherst/>.
- Ferrari, Matthew P. 2014. "'Born' Survivors and Their Trickster Cousins: Masculine Primitive Ideals and Manly (Re)Creation on Reality Television." In *Reality Television: Oddities of Culture*, edited by Allison F. Slade, Amber J. Narro and Burton F. Buchanan, 213-236. Lanham: Lexington.

- Fleres, Augie, and Shane Michael Dixon. 2011. "Cutting, Driving, Digging, and Harvesting: Re-masculinizing the Working-Class Heroic." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36 (4): 579-597.
- Goodridge, Andrew. 2010. "Discovery Channel's Nature-Reality Hybrid Shows." In *Old and New Media after Katrina*, edited by Diane Negra, 113-130. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grazian, David. 2010. "Neoliberalism and the Realities of Reality TV." *Contexts* 9 (2): 68-71.
- Grylls, Bear. 2012. *Mud, Sweat and Tears: The Autobiography*. London: Transworld.
- Hall, Stuart. 1988. *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London: Verso.
- Hall, Stuart. 2005. "New Labour's Double-shuffle." *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27 (4): 319-335.
- Horak, Jan-Christopher. 2001. "Wildlife Documentaries: From Classical Forms to Reality TV." *Film History* 18 (4): 459-475.
- Horkheimer, Max. 2004. *Eclipse of Reason*. London: Continuum.
- Kavka, Misha. 2012. *Reality TV*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kavka, Misha. 2014. "Reality TV and the Gendered Politics of Flaunting." In *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, edited by Brenda R. Weber, 54-75. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kimmel, Michael S. 1995. "'Born to Run': Nineteenth-Century Fantasies of Masculine Retreat and Re-creation (or The Historical Rust on Iron John)." In *The Politics of Manhood*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel, 115-150. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kirkby, Lisa A. 2013. "Cowboys of the High Seas: Representations of Working-Class Masculinity on Deadliest Catch." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 46 (1): 109-118.
- Know Your Meme. n.d. "Bear Grylls / Better Drink My Own Piss." <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bear-grylls-better-drink-my-own-piss>.
- Kraszewski, Jon. 2017. *Reality TV*. New York: Routledge.
- Lotz, Amanda D. 2014. *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*. New York: New York University Press.
- Louw, Pat. 2006. "Nature documentaries: Eco-tainment? The case of *MM&M (Mad Mike and Mark)*." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 18 (1): 146-162.
- Mancuso, Vinnie. 2018. "Why Bear Grylls Thinks You Should Hold Your Own Poop." *Men's Health*, March 19. <https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a19459090/bear-grylls-interview-how-to-survive/>.

- McCarthy, Anna. 2007. "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering." *Social Text* 25 (4): 17-41.
- McMurria, John. 2008. "Desperate Citizens and Good Samaritans: Neoliberalism and Makeover Reality TV." *Television & New Media* 9 (4): 305-332.
- Mitman, Gregg. 1999. *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife in Film*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Morris, Kevin. 2011. "Urine-drinking Meme Man is a Hit." *Daily Dot*, September 13. <https://www.dailydot.com/culture/urine-drinking-meme-iama/>.
- Ouellette, Laurie, and James Hay. 2008. *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-welfare Citizenship*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Redden, Guy. 2018. "Is Reality TV Neoliberal?" *Television & New Media* 19 (5): 399-414.
- Russell, Catherine. 1999. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1978. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Octagon Books.
- Vander Schee, Carolyn, and Kip Kline. 2013. "Neoliberal Exploitation in Reality Television: Youth, Health and the Spectacle of Celebrity 'Concern'." *Journal of Youth Studies* 16 (5): 565-578.
- Vivanco, Luis A. 2004. "The Work of Environmentalism in an Age of Televisual Adventures." *Cultural Dynamics* 16 (1): 5-27.
- Webb, Justin. 2016. "Macho Men are Finished – and Grayson Perry Knows Why." *Radio Times*, May 5. <https://www.radiotimes.com/news/2016-05-05/macho-men-are-finished-and-grayson-perry-knows-why/>.
- Wightman, Catriona. 2015. "8 Most Gross Bear Grylls Moments that will Haunt Your Nightmares." *Digital Spy*, September 9. <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/a663352/8-most-gross-bear-grylls-moments-that-will-haunt-your-nightmares/>.
- Woods, Faye. 2014. "Classed Femininity, Performativity, and Camp in British Structured Reality Programming." *Television & New Media* 15 (3): 197-214.