

“A Fine Line”: Crossing and Erecting Borders in Representing Male Athletes’ Relationships to Nature

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Tämä artikkeli tutkii seikkailu-urheilun ja luonnon suhdetta käyttäen lähtökohtanaan rajojen käsitettä. Se keskittyy erityisesti siihen, miten miesurheilijoiden luontosuhde representoidaan kaupallisissa seikkailu-urheiluelokuvissa. Analyysi yhdistää ekokriittisen teorian kriittiseen miestutkimukseen, muodostaen näin ekomaskuliinisen näkökulman aiheeseen. Materiaali koostuu kuudesta seikkailuelokuvasta. Artikkelin osoittaa kahden vastakkaisen diskurssin läsnäolon urheilijoiden luontosuhteen representoimisessa: kilpailusta ja perinteisistä maskuliinisuuden merkitysistä koostuva maskuliininen diskurssi, ja toisaalta feminiinisempi diskurssi, joka painottaa urheilijoiden yhteyttä ja identifikoitumista luontoon. Artikkelin osoittaa, miten kulttuurinen mies/naisdikotomia vaikuttaa siihen, miten luontosuhde on materiaalissa representoitu.

Keywords: adventure sports, borders, ecocriticism, ecomasculinity, nature

1 Introduction: Ecomasculinity and Borders

This paper examines the relationship between adventure sports and nature using the concept of borders as its point of departure. It specifically investigates how *male* athletes’ nature relationships are represented in contemporary adventure films. The analysis of the subject uses both ecocritical theory and theory on gender and masculinities, and this combination forms an ecomasculine viewpoint into the subject. This paper focuses on two things: first, on markers of masculinity and femininity and, second, on how and where those markers as borders are blurred. It shows how traditional, cultural male/female dichotomies extend also to how relationships to nature are represented in contemporary adventure films, i.e. how clear borders between males and females are implicit in them, and how they coincide with equally clear borders between individuals and nature.

In the present context, adventure sports are defined broadly as sports that take place outdoors, i.e. in nature, and that contain at least a moderate amount of risk to their practitioners. The particular films discussed in this paper all depict mountain sports. Although adventure sports participants who do their sports in nature are primarily male, curiously little research has so far been done on the bearing of gender in the formation of adventure athletes’ nature relationship, and this paper therefore approaches the topic from the above mentioned “ecomasculine” viewpoint. Ecocriticism itself is an interdisciplinary field “in nature”, and feminist theory has often been combined into it to form an ecofeminist theoretical branch. A corresponding ecomasculine branch of theory

is, however, nearly non-existent, and previous research on the relationship between adventure sports and nature scant from either a gendered *or* ecocritical viewpoint. Despite several studies (see, e.g. Bayers 2003; Vainio 2003; McCarthy 2008; Thorpe 2010) on nature, gender, and sports, and the pairing into two of any combinations of them, this researcher is not aware of a single study that would have as its explicit research object all three of them together.

To address the apparent need for further research, and taking into account the specificity of the current sporting context, this paper therefore employs ecocriticism and masculine studies to provide it a hermeneutic rationale appropriate to the relative novelty of the chosen approach. Ecocriticism and masculine studies are both concerned with questions of ethics, and provide effective theoretical tools to investigate the borders between, first, humans and nature and, second, male and female, and combining them into an ecomasculine approach is therefore methodologically useful. However, the very term ecomasculinity is not yet well established, having been tentatively used only by a handful of scholars such as Martin Hultman (2013) who actually uses the rather unwieldy term “Ecomodern Masculinity” (2013: 79), and David Kreps (2010). In addition to them, Mark Allister’s *Eco-Man* (2004) does investigate the relationship between nature and masculinity, but not in relation to sports. Therefore, the validity of the term can be problematized from a nomenclatural standpoint, and it could arguably be included under the wider umbrella term of ecofeminism (for a contemporary problematization of “ecofeminism” in favor of “feminist ecocriticism”, see, e.g. Oppermann 2013). However, it is arguably precisely this kind of exclusion of masculine viewpoints into nature that indirectly contributes to the hostile relationships to nature that are represented in some of the material discussed below, i.e. it in fact upholds existing binaries where in the pairings of male/female and culture/nature the previous is always higher. If masculinity is consistently associated not with nature but its dialectic opposite, culture, then it is hardly surprising that some masculine relationships with nature are so problematic. Masculine studies have diverged within gender studies from feminist studies to provide a better critical platform for studying masculinities, and R.W. Connell has hoped that masculine “green politics” (2005: 128) could offer resistance to traditional, hegemonic forms of masculinity. The persistence of masculine oppression of both women and nature is well established also within ecocritical theory (see, e.g. Buell 2005: 109; Oppermann 2011: 16). This paper next discusses the above as it pertains to the concepts of space, place and borders.

Space and place are central to ecocriticism, and inextricably connected to borders. Modern ecocriticism studies the material world, i.e., the place in space where actual things happen. Place, and specifically, a “sense of place” is traditionally seen as fundamentally important in forming a sound and ethically viable relationship with the natural world. The reasoning has been that to know a place means an increased likeli-

hood in caring for its nature. The certain “provincialism” that this may whiff of has led some ecocritical thinkers to see place as an outdated and limiting concept. According to Ursula Heise, ecocriticism should instead embrace a borderless “eco-cosmopolitanism” (2008: 59) and think in planetary terms instead of only local ones. She uses the example from Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, where the aliens who notify planet Earth of its immanent destruction are amazed that the residents of the planet show no interest in local matters, such as, the building of a new intergalactic highway through the spatial location of the Earth, to illustrate her point that “local” and “planetary” are very much relative terms (2008: 3).

The gendered and “socially constructed” nature of place and its “inherently dichotomous” tendencies are also discussed in a feminist ecocritical context by Christa Grewe-Volpp who argues, echoing Doreen Massey, that thinking about place in sedentary, essentialist terms leads to “the creation of fixed boundaries and the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (2013: 222). Instead, she argues that in reality the borders of place are “constantly evolving, never permanent or fixed” (2013: 221). Axel Goodbody uses Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the *rhizome* (something that is essentially borderless and always *between*) in an ecocritical context to discuss modern “place-belonging” (2011: 89) and the “subversive and transgressive” (2011: 90) potential of the concept in order to move beyond clear borders and simple dualisms into a “dissolving [of] the boundaries” (2011: 89) between human and non-human. Humans, however, are experts in erecting borders, which is testified by the clear borders drawn between plants and animals, both human and non-human, and the perpetuation of the discourse of “us” and “them” (Mills 1999: 52) that this leads to.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, this kind of dichotomization is not present in nature (2005: 5) because, if the premise of the rhizome is accepted, it does not follow the logic of binaries but instead diverse “semiotic chains” connected to “anything other” (2005: 7), and thus, effectively produces borders that are so porous that their ontological validity may be questioned. Yet, everyday reality opposes this quintessentially postmodern concept, and borders and dichotomies are being produced culturally. Connell, citing Barrie Thorne’s ethnographic research, discusses this in describing how already adolescent boys and girls split into “boys’ and girls’” sports at school and thus participate in what Thorne called “borderwork” where clear gender borders are created (2009: 15–16). Stacy Alaimo has also written on this “border work” (2001: 280) concept in a film context, arguing that clear borders between human and non-human are the standard in mainstream films with a “vertical semiotics” (where the human is free to float *above* nature), and thus work to reestablish boundaries (2001: 280) whenever they have been questioned by the rhizomatic blurrings of postmodern society and its cultural practices and artefacts that threaten to compromise the solidity of hegemony-producing borders.

2 Discussion: From Conquest to Connection

This paper now discusses the binary discourse concerning the representation of adventure athletes' relationship to nature in the material. The content of the films has been divided into two initial categories according to the way this relationship is represented. This is done fully consciously of the obvious irony of investigating borders by putting up such a dichotomous construct. The findings, however, justify this approach. There exists in the material, first, a masculine discourse that consists of competition and traditionally masculine traits such as muscle, boldness, and aggression, and, second, a more feminine discourse that places more emphasis on representing the athletes' connection to nature and identification with it. In addition to discussing how borders are established in the above categories, this paper also indicates where in these films this borderwork is *not* present, but where the borders between the categories are blurred and form a distinct third category. The discussion takes into account both lexical items and visual imagery present in the films.

The material consists of six contemporary nonfiction adventure films that portray adventure athletes engaging in sports such as mountain climbing, mountain running, and ski mountaineering. All of these variations of mountain sports share common elements of danger, need of physical endurance, and the location: mountains. The films are: *A Fine Line* (2012), *Déjame Vivir* (2013), *Unbreakable* (2012), *In the High Country* (2013), and *Reel Rock 7* (2012) and *8* (2013). This particular material has been chosen for two reasons. First, all six films are very recent, and, second, very popular within the adventure sports field. The films themselves cannot be divided into neat categories based simply on the representations of masculinity and femininity. Therefore, the classification instead follows the dichotomous constructs found within them.

First under discussion are films where a masculine discourse is perpetuated. The samples are from *Unbreakable* and *Reel Rock 7*. Masculinity in these films is produced by representations of tattooed and muscular hypermasculine bodies, possession of hegemonic masculinity through mastering the challenges presented by nature using those hypermasculine bodies as agents of dominance, having high tolerance of pain, and, lexically, using war metaphors to represent nature as an object to be conquered. Alison Butler echoes Laura Mulvey in claiming that “[I]n mainstream cinema [...] there is a gendered division of labour which allies the male hero with the movement of the narrative and the female figure with pleasurable spectacle” (2008: 393). This division is present also in the films discussed here: Potential female agency is thwarted from the very start, as “hyperfemininity” as a concept excludes athletic prowess, unlike hypermasculinity.

Besides visual imagery, markers of masculinity are present in these films in purely lexical terms also, starting from the very names of the films and the episodes within them. In *Unbreakable*, the title espouses notions of masculinity and the male body as something hard and unbreachable. The film narrates the events of a 100 mile mountain running race where, once the race is over, only one male athlete stands as victor while others have succumbed. He is the ultimate male: "unbreakable". Richard Dyer has discussed the borders between the male body and nature, and how, in contemporary mainstream culture, a "hard, contoured body" is more physically isolated from nature than a weaker body with less defined "contours", using the clichéd image of the male body set "against the horizon" as an example (2005: 152). He also suggests that this separateness is "important to the white male ego" (2005: 152) and, paraphrasing Klaus Theweleit, suggests that only with such a hard body can the "horror" of an amalgamation with "femininity and non-whiteness" be avoided (2005: 153).

Presented next is a sample of the lexis in the film *Reel Rock 7*. It is divided into four episodes: 1) *la Dura Dura* ("The Hard Hard"), 2) *The Shark's Fin*, 3) *Wide Boyz*, and 4) *Honnold 3.0*. Hardness and masculinity are explicit here, as is traditional conquest discourse in the form of *The Shark's Fin*. The fin in question is the name of a mountain feature in India that has a shape reminiscent of a shark's fin. In the film three Western climbers succeed in climbing it for the first time, and the film's narrative deploys a classic conquest narrative with implicit connotations to trophy hunting and possession of natural entities. Another, more complicated kind of discourse is present both in the name of the episode titled *Honnold 3.0*, and in the content of the episode, where the male superstar climber is represented as a cyborg who/that is impervious to either feminine softness, or human weaknesses such as fear, at all, and is instead an updated version of a climbing machine. Masculinity is marked implicitly in the film's visual imagery, and explicitly in its lexis. The following is a sample of the lexis in the film *Reel Rock 7*, in which the climbers "have", "want", "possess", and "conquer" climbs and mountains. They also have "muscle", "balls", and "girlfriend[s]"; they "roll like rock star[s]"; they call other, less masculine people "candyasses" but they themselves are "McGyver[s]", and "explorers born too late"; nevertheless, "the summit of the universe welcomes us [them] in". They are also "strong, bold, and masochistic", they "declare war", are "working class" "tough guys", "roughnecks", participate in "bar fights", and: "fuck the pain". The above illustrates how a distinctly aggressive masculinity in relation to nature is represented here, and how it is explicit even on the lexical level.

The second category shows the presence of a feminine discourse. In the films *Reel Rock 7* and 8, female climbers are represented as graceful, emotional, and connected to nature. Laura Mulvey's concept of the Gaze can be used in film studies as a "political weapon" (Mulvey 1975: 57) to challenge patriarchy, and in this particular context, to investigate borderwork. The films discussed here invite the male gaze upon the female

climbers, and the women, in Mulvey's terms, act as "bearer[s] of meaning, not maker[s] of meaning" (1975: 58). In the films they are represented as closer to nature than their male counterparts. They dress "light" and look dreamily towards distant horizons with the wind in their hair. When they climb, there is no aggressive music playing in the background; instead, the camera focuses on their graceful movement up the rock. If indeed, as bell hooks claims, "power as domination reproduces itself in different locations employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control" (2003: 216), then these films and, arguably, the athletes portrayed in them, are agents in borderwork that perpetuates dichotomous gender roles. Further, in *Reel Rock 8* the female climber is assigned the role of *The Spice Girl* whereas the male climbers are referred to as "*the beast*", "*The Sensei*" and "*The Swiss Machine*". To the "*Spice Girl*", traditional rock climbing is "*rather macho*", and "*you need to have balls*" to do it because "*danger is an important part*" of it. Regardless of how brave her climbing is, she is still referred to as a "*small*" and "*cute blond girl*" who is not afraid to laugh, cry, and, dance, when the mood takes her, even while she climbs. The differences in markers of femininity compared to the markers of masculinity are apparent. The reasons for this, however, are not. The fact that the films are made in close collaboration with commercial entities and thus arguably not primarily interested in social or environmental change but in increased profit through the perpetuation of existing dichotomies, seems a plausible explanation, and is discussed further in the conclusions.

Possibly the most interesting category presented here is the third one where the above borders are blurred because it opens up possibilities both for the adventure film genre, and the adventure athlete, to resist dichotomies. As suggested in the beginning of this paper, the concept of the rhizome is a potentially useful tool in investigating borderwork. However, film theorist Alison Butler has criticized its use in challenging male/female binaries, stating that, for example "female action hero[es]" cannot escape "binary gender terms", and she instead prefers Judith Butler's gender performativity theory (see, e.g. Judith Butler 1993: 12–13; 1999: 173–180) as a more suitable theoretical tool (2008: 404). This paper does not consider the two to necessarily exclude each other, however, as not all performative acts correspond with clear binaries. Richard Dyer has shown how even two archetypes of white male muscularity, Tarzan and Rambo, can, despite their clearly contoured physiques, express "closeness to nature" and blur human/non-human borders by blending into their natural surroundings (Dyer 2005: 157). This obviously does not mean that they have necessarily transcended borderwork as such, as their ontological starting point is still defined by a privileged, implicitly heterosexual white masculinity, as it is with the athletes discussed here.

All of the films contain instances of border crossings, but the below discussion concerns films where they have the most potential to truly challenge dichotomous constructs instead of merely contributing to the existing binaries. The films' protagonists are over-

whelmingly male. The rare instances of women participating in the blurring of borders happens mainly through representations of them engaging in traditionally male practices in the first place, and even in those instances the transformative potential of the acts themselves is diminished by the actors being firmly placed within the confines of the culturally accepted female sex role.

Male femininity in the films is represented by the male athlete having embodied knowledge of self and body. His body is the opposite of the hypermasculine, muscled body. It is instead almost emaciated, and therefore more vulnerable and able to connect and identify with both nature and women, who are represented as companions, not possessions. In *In the High Country*, mountains are depicted explicitly as "place[s] to investigate the intersection of landscape and movement", where "the borders blur between landscape and self, between human and mountain", and where the athletes "do what it takes to immerse [...] in the landscape". The male protagonist of the film is represented as living a simple lifestyle out of the back of a pickup truck. He does not possess such masculine markers as a girlfriend/family/house. His vulnerability is further foregrounded through soundtrack choices, through showing him taking medicine for heart problems, and painting his blackened toenails. Also in the film *Déjàme Vivir* ("Let me Live"), man's connection and identification with mountains is foregrounded, and present is a different type of relationship to women than in most of the other films here. Now the woman is shown as a companion who participates in the same endeavor as the male protagonist of the film. However, problematically, at the same time, the fit and fast men in the film are still compared to "Ferraris", and when the Western male protagonists cross concrete international borders to Russia and Georgia, the otherness of the East is emphasized by focusing on poorness, rusted metal buildings, decrepit toilet systems, humorously bad English skills, and calling the Russian competitor of the main protagonist a "monster". According to Alaimo, such othering is, through perpetuating the binary discourse of "low" and "high" a contributor to both "border work" and the establishment of a "semiotics of the vertical" (2001: 283).

The title of *A Fine Line* refers to the fine lines of mountains and landscapes, as well as to the fine lines between life and death. Here the male protagonist's connection to nature is emphasized by representing him as a world-class athlete who still trains and fuels by drinking water straight from glacial streams, picking fresh berries, cooling his cheek against cool rock, playing with birds, and chasing mountain goats for pleasure. His body is notably androgynous with less muscle than the hypermasculine climber athletes. Through comparisons between him and mountain goats his connection to nature is represented as being one of connection. Here, finally, is the arrival of a horizontal semiotics where man is represented as part of nature, not its conqueror from above.

3 Conclusions: Questions, Problematizations, and Future Ramifications

This paper showed how clear gender borders reinforce clear human/non-human borders, and how the blurring of those borders facilitates a nature relationship based on connection. From this, two pertinent questions follow: Does adventure media perpetuate existing borders, or can it challenge them? And will the male adventure athlete be able to forge a new kind of male identity and nature relationship through deconstructing some of the borders set between self, nature, and the feminine? If, as sports sociologists Brummett and Kraft claim, sports indeed are central to the building of both social and gender identities (2009: 11–13), then it is of obvious importance what kind of gendered identities, first, are being built, and, second and more urgently, *should* be built. The answer to the first question was already discussed in the context of the films. The answer to the second question is more elusive, but based on the above discussion a tentative answer can be given: ones that do not participate in the perpetuation of hierarchical dichotomies through continued borderwork but instead prefer the non-hierarchical nature of the rhizome as an operational model. If such a paradigm shift should take place, it would arguably also be in the interests of the commercial content providers to conform to the change in their product consumer profile and act in ways that would contribute to the change, not hinder it.

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