

Beyond the Solo: Apparatus, Ethics, and Undoing Individualist Mythology in 'Free Solo'

Sports documentaries have long relied on the premise that athletic excellence comes from an unassisted and inherent personal will. An ideal, that the camera merely captures, of solitary mastery and brilliance. *Free Solo* (Vasarhelyi & Chin, 2018) assumes this convention, positioning Alex Honnold as the figure of absolute self-reliance, scaling El Capitan with nothing more than his body. The film appears to offer spectators privileged access to an act whose purity lies in its resistance to mediation, a performance that is situated prior to, and independent of, cinematic intervention and appraisal. This, then, provides a gateway into an examination of the foundational illusion of the sports documentary genre: that the camera merely records what the athlete independently achieves, or fails to achieve.

Gregory Currie's account of documentary photographic images as "traces left on the world by the subjects themselves" ruptures this illusion (Currie 286). For Currie, in *Visible Traces*, documentary images, more so than just depicting events as they happened, assume the material imprint of a prior encounter. She contends that this is a form of representation that is "independent of belief," because the camera "records what is in front of it, and not what the photographer thinks is in front of it" (286). This distinction is key since it delineates the spectator's sense that the image conveys a pre-existing reality. However, *Free Solo* inadvertently reveals the precariousness of this distinction by showcasing how this trace-based indexicality is entwined with staging, planning, performance, and collective effort. The imagery of Honnold hanging off the 3,000-foot rock face in Yosemite National Park, or the moments of silent mediation as he stops climbing for a breath, may function as traces of a reality but it is important to note that they emerge from a complex choreography of rigging, risk assessment, and crew

positioning. These confounding elements of production and logistical realities disrupt the premise that Honnold's achievement stands entirely apart from its cinematic representation. Those iconic shots mentioned above promise unmediated access but are, in fact, the product of precisely the kind of intervention that Currie identifies as outside the realm of mere recording.

It is this tension between the narrative of solitary mastery and the documentary's growing exposure of its own cinematic and organizational apparatus that structures the film's contradiction. Therefore, in analyzing two key sequences from the film, and later narrative and formal developments through various theoretical lenses, this paper argues that *Free Solo* works relentlessly to sustain the fantasy of expressive individualism by framing its subject as self-reliant, yet continually reveals the mediated, collective, and technologically engineered nature of the climb, complicating both the sports documentary genre's claim to indexical authority and its ideological investment in the myth of the self-made individual. By revealing its own formal strategies, its ideological and political dimensions, and how ethically fraught Honnold's ascent really is, *Free Solo* repeatedly destabilizes the genre's investment in the unmediated athletic image.

The film's opening sequence offers a strong articulation of the film's governing narrative and formal logic. Specifically, Alex Honnold's ascent being an achievement generated from an inner will and ability, unmediated by externalities. The film commits to a visual rhetoric of individual mastery right from the outset, before any dialogic framing or contextual clues. A long-lens sweeps across the face of El Capitan as Honnold's body appears in the frame: a lone vertical figure, hanging off the granite plane, against a vast, seemingly never-ending backdrop. This scale is paradoxical in that his infinitesimal contribution to the frame is rendered as the center of the image. This paradox, then, encodes his climb as a confrontation between an

exceptional individual faculty and an indifferent landscape. The camera stages this confrontation as if it were a naturally occurring event, free of influence or negotiation.

This sequence constitutes various formal choices that push forth this very idea. The wide, drifting shot grants no detectable presence to the camera crew. This absence is heightened by the floating appearance of the camera, visually free of the equipment required to place it there. Furthermore, the occasional cutaways to mounted cameras rigged along the wall deliver perspectives that seem to emerge from El Capitan itself. The rock, in *Free Solo*, is capable and willing to perceive and replay its own traversals. In contrast, when the point-of-view footage from Honnold's chest camera cuts in, the spectator is suddenly reapproximated to the immediacy of the moment and the effort. Balance, tactility, and human perception is foregrounded and is therein captured on camera. These shots in succession, regimented and carefully crafted as they are, operate within what Currie calls the "hermeneutic circle," wherein a shot's documentary status appears to be guaranteed by the documentary whole, while the whole's status is inferred from the appearance of transparency of its parts (Currie 292). These initial moments of *Free Solo* signal no formal signifiers required to generate the images it produces; or, put another way, they do not make clear the film's documentary status beyond prior knowledge of the "whole."

However, it is important to note that this opening sequence does not rest on its ability to represent a "photographic trace," as described above, rather it performs what Currie describes as "revealing more things the photographer did not expect, for the film image records movement as well as the things a still photograph records" (288). He further describes this property of cinematic movement as being able to disclose "what the movement was really like," referring to the promise of the cinematic image showing more than the filmmaker could consciously assemble. The affective dimensions of this opening sequence, then, constructed via drifting

cameras, looking on from impossible distances, reveal the embodied rhythm of Honnold's movement. The spectator is subject to every little micro-adjustment of grip and balance, tiny shifts in foot placement, and tactical breaths Honnold takes. In accruing this sense of access for the spectator, *Free Solo* purports that the climb itself created objective truths that were somehow captured but not manufactured.

When the film adopts the POV from Honnold's own body, this presumption of access is intensified in that it appears to give way to all the spatial distance provided to the shots right before it. The climb, then, is reproduced as an indexical imprint of his lived experience in relation to it, thus inviting the spectator to authenticate the moment. Currie's insistence that photography's structural ability to disclose unintentional details further strengthens the contention that this moment utilizes the illusion of unmediated recording. In concealing the apparatus required to produce these images, though, *Free Solo* redirects the audience's attention toward the authentic. Currie claims that "we must not...[believe] the false claim that photographs never mislead," thus highlighting *Free Solo*'s leveraging of the documentary aesthetic to authenticate Honnold's struggle while also immersing it in an odd reflexivity (287). The conditions of production remain persistent, thus allowing traces of mediation within the image's aesthetic dimensions.

This sequence's aesthetic commitment to Honnold as an unassisted subject characterizes his effort and ascent as a function of bodily excellence and internal will rather than a feat embedded in a dense network of labor, planning, and risk. What becomes legible, then, is an ideological function that emerges as a result of the formal suppression of apparatus and assistance: the myth of the individual and self-sufficiency. In *Expressive Individualism & the Myth of the Self-Made Man*, Heike Paul traces American expressive individualism, identifying

the “legendary hero” of U.S. culture as generating his achievements from within, or at least appearing to, independent of structural conditions (Paul 367). She characterizes this archetype of the “self-made man” as resting on a culturally persistent belief that “upward mobility in US society is unlimited regardless of inherited social and financial status” (367). This ideological attribution is reproduced in this opening sequence, and largely across the entire film, though form. The climb is framed as an equivalent to the myth of self-reliance wherein success appears to originate solely from a set of personal factors, all of which are within the control of the individual. By visually isolating Honnold from the industrial and interpersonal networks that support his effort, the sequence inhabits what Paul describes as the “illusion that the exception is the rule,” which propagates the idea that broader structural and societal factors remain futile in the face of ideal individual effort (368).

Free Solo’s prologue operates through a logic of erasure, effacing the conditions of possibility and enabling structures so thoroughly that they seem irrelevant to the outcome. The climb is introduced through generated individual action before it is placed within a more complex system of sponsorships, training regiments, camera installations, crew choreography, and safety calculations. Alex Honnold’s presence in the center of the frame prompts the audience to skip the stage where they question the making of the images and accept a constructed, delivered product wherein such interrogations feel immaterial.

What becomes evident in the initial moments of *Free Solo* is a two-pronged effort. The film’s deployment of cinematic movement, along with the image’s capacity to reveal that which is unplanned, creates a strong sensation of unmediated access to Honnold’s physical condition of hanging off a rock face with no ropes. In addition to the exploitation of the nature of the image, the film formally signifies an ideology that aligns with Paul’s analysis of the self-made myth,

wherein the appearance of quasi-independent achievement is sustained through an intentional omission of the conditions that enable it. The result, generated merely through a series of formal and aesthetic choices, is a constructed ethos of autonomy and self-reliance. It is only later, as the film begins to expose its own apparatus and production conditions, that this carefully forged illusion begins to crack. The ethos of individualism imbued within the opening sequence of *Free Solo*, explicated in the prior section, become immediately complicated when seen in opposition to subsequent one. The film compromises its visual language abruptly with a rapid montage of Honnold's public life within the climbing-industrial complex. He attends book signings, radio interviews, sponsor events, and speaking engagements. This abrupt tonal shift retools the man, Alex Honnold, from being an elemental figure in Yosemite to a cog in a much larger structural machine that produced, and continues to uphold, the conditions he finds success in. This juxtaposition exposes a second, less visible system that gives further assurance to the myth being generated via the commodification and institutional management of the public figure, Alex Honnold; a sharp contrast from his positioning during the first few shots. His ascent up El Capitan reveals itself to be an endeavor embedded in the process of publicity, distribution, and reception. Honnold's status as a free soloer is further illuminated with graphics and television footage and thereafter concretizes his preexisting celebrity. The myth of individualist achievement, then, is proven to be sustained by the mass media environment surrounding him and his life's work—a contradiction built into the fabric of *Free Solo*'s imagery.

The sequence in question is structured through short abrupt cuts of Honnold signing books, talking about his mindset, giving a speech, being interviewed for television, and more activities that frame him through this mediated lens. In refraining from narrativizing or stylizing these moments, *Free Solo* creates a tone of observational directness as a way to introduce

Honnold to the spectator. However, it does this through modes which would already be accessible to those who were not subject to the opening sequence of the climb. In other words, this kind of introduction stands in direct opposition to the moments just before. Bill Nichols' account of documentary filmmaking and subjecthood provides a useful framework through which to see how *Free Solo* negotiates Honnold's precarious positioning here. He would argue that Honnold, as a "social actor," would "ignore the filmmakers" as his attention gets drawn towards "pressing demands or crises of [his] own" (Nichols 154). However, in these scenes the inverse is evident. Honnold's social exteriority appears to be managed and organized around the maintenance of two kinds of images; first, his media-facing one, and second, the one encountering the documentary. Nichols further elucidates the idea that observational filmmaking as a mode of representation carries the risk of placing viewers "at the keyhole" wherein they are subject to the images produced as a result of "pleasure in looking" on the part of the filmmaker (Nichols 155). While these scenes of Honnold are not in themselves ethically fraught in the way scenes of his climb later in the film become, they carry with them an unspoken peculiarity. The spectator is transposed to events that occur for the sake of image-making while simultaneously being promised a certain sense of access. Honnold's continuous rearticulation of his philosophy and repetition of climbing stories constitute a performance, and *Free Solo's* inclusion of these moments points towards an acknowledgement of non-neutrality. The viewer's gaze is supported, then, by the same mediator and industrial structures that shape Honnold's visibility.

The few private moments of Honnold in his van, driving from place to place, further bring to light what Nichols describes as "the question of unacknowledged or indirect intrusion," wherein he wonders whether "people conduct themselves in ways that will color our perceptions of them, for better or worse" (155). Honnold's practical approach to being perceived by various

onlookers suggests a persona shaped by the expectation of being watched and recorded, yet it is a persona that is still characterized by individual excellence. His fame arises from the idea that he climbs alone and without any assistance, but the representational contexts that frame that idea demand highly organized and curated systems. Thus, the montage points to the idea of Honnold's sense of self being mediated and constructed as a function of his role as a figure of climbing culture, sponsorship, and extreme sport media. Additionally, his depicted moments of aloneness in the van are too mediated by the documentary encounter, suggesting an "attempt to satisfy a filmmaker who does not say what it is he or she wants," further complicating his represented identity as the figure of absolute self reliance (155).

Another kind of representational tension within this short sequence is one of ideology. The montage further strengthens Heike Paul's idea that the American self-made myth persists through continual cultural invocation that downplay structural support in favor of singular ability (Paul 367-68). Even when Honnold is surrounded by those that continue this form of invocation he is centered as the figure of meaning. The institutional networks that sustain his image are shown but are represented peripherally. In this way, the montage reinforces the rhetoric of expressive individualism through inadvertent exposure of its dependence on collective effort. Honnold's interaction with the documentarian's camera further restates this, as he manages a dual identity for the purpose of the narrative.

As is evident from this juxtaposition of sequences, even before the title card appears, *Free Solo* struggles to contain the visibility of its surrounding edifice. The montage reveals the unavoidable fact of Honnold's public life in stark contrast to the attempt at invisibilizing the role of the mediating camera in the prior sequence. As a result, Honnold is positioned as an athlete who is produced and represented by various institutions that encircle him while also being

depicted as an autonomous isolate. It becomes clear, then, that there cannot be a representation of autonomy without the presence of an apparatus that renders it visible, forming a crack early in the film. Honnold's image is hinted at being controlled by various collective conditions, but this contradiction still remains to be foregrounded completely. However, the appearance of unassisted achievement now becomes entangled with the mechanisms that sustain it, further upholding the paradox of Honnold's centrality to the literal and metaphorical frame in *Free Solo*.

The film subsequently fractures the dual illusion it creates at the start by foregrounding the collaborative, ethically fraught labor that makes Honnold's climb possible, and thus recordable. When Jimmy Chin, one of the directors of *Free Solo*, makes his first appearance to discuss the stakes of the project, specifically the risks surrounding filming the "Boulder Problem" (a particularly difficult section of the climb), the film declares a shift in what takes tonal and narrative primacy. The presence of cameras, crew, and cinematic intention throughout the film makes it so that the entire process becomes inseparable from Honnold's own objective. In gradually revealing its own apparatus, *Free Solo* diffuses authorship and responsibility to each member on- and off-screen. A great deal of pressure and suspense allotted to the dramatic center in the later part of the film can be attributed to these complexities, all pointing to a core tension wherein *Free Solo* struggles to reckon with its status as a documentary.

As a result, this also implicates the spectator in what Caetlin Benson-Allott denotes as a significant renegotiation of the "spectatorial contract," one that dictates non-fiction viewing (Benson-Allott 69). In *Watching without a Rope*, she frames *Free Solo* as a documentary-film that reaches for a destabilization of the agreed upon normalcy that viewers consent to witness. In writing, "By the time you read this, Alex Honnold may be dead," she highlights the film's key dramatic element: the possibility of witnessing on-camera death (68). Furthermore, the idea that

the filmmakers “would have finished the film...even if Honnold had died mid-climb” transforms, for her, the viewing experience into an encounter with real mortal stakes (68). This forces both affective and ethical participation on part of the spectator within a scenario where death would have remained visible and framed as part of the constructed narrative. She further argues that this makes the film a “psychic threat” in which the spectator “could no longer trust [Elizabeth Chai] Vasarhelyi and Chin to deliver the safe spectatorial experience” that seemed to be promised from its opening moments (68). This destabilization of spectatorship is fundamentally tied, then, to that of the individualist fantasy the film continually reinforces. The possibility of death enters the dramatic and realistic frame in tandem, effectively terminating the viewer’s perception of Honnold as a self-reliant subject operating outside of the conditions that surround and uphold him. Moreover, the conditions of filming become inseparable from the risk he carries, thus recontextualizing the climb as a result and function of the collective and structural network earlier moments in the film chose to suppress. The interpretive and mediating power of *Free Solo*’s camera finally turns back onto the spectator.

The possibility of Honnold’s death during filming can be related to Vivian Sobchack’s writing on the stakes of the very same in *Inscribing Ethical Space*. For Sobchack, even the possibility of a “nonfictional screen event” ending in death lends “the very act of looking at the film [with an] ethical charge, and this act is itself an object of ethical judgment” (Sobchack 244). More critically, she insists that “at minimum two viewers are ethically implicated” at such a juncture: the filmmaker whose gaze controls what is seen, and the spectator who later looks at that gaze (244). Needless to say, *Free Solo* never depicts Honnold’s death but repeatedly foregrounds the possibility wherein it may need to be confronted. Benson-Allott cites various moments where both Honnold and the film’s directors “sidestep their responsibility” in the

matter, notably when Chin states that “the worst possible scenario is that one of us would do something that would kill him” (Benson-Allott 70). By doing this, the film places both filmmakers and audience with what Sobchack terms an “ethical space” wherein the viewer’s relationship to the event is morally blighted and open to interpretation.

Besides the question of death, the apparatus utilized in capturing all of this comes out of the abstract and materializes as a visible structure. As the film goes on, we see it expose more of itself. Chin and other crew members are routinely seen debating the specifics of the endeavor, in addition to various scenes of rigging and mounting, camera logistics, ethical deliberations, and direct viewer address. The more *Free Solo* exposes its own instruments, the more it further ruptures, inadvertently, the ideological myth of the autonomous individual. This is most notable during the above mentioned “Boulder Problem” scene. The film routinely cuts back to Chin watching the climb on his monitor, wincing occasionally along with the entire surrounding crew. These kinds of scenes in the film foreground the shared ethical burden that underscores each moment leading up to, and during, the Free Solo. The documentary mode ceases to be a neutral recorder of “traces” of solitary achievement, thus undermining its indexical authority. Rather, it reveals itself as a site for the confluence of collaboration, technological interference, and ethical uncertainty which makes the climb, and the film, possible. The spectator, struck with a “defamiliarization of the spectatorial contract,” becomes an active participant in that very network. When the cinematic and logistical apparatus rears its head as the film goes on, the film profoundly destabilizes the myth of individualism.

More critically, however, is the political and economic framework that makes operable and visible the material conditions underwriting both Honnold’s image and the narrative of self-reliance that *Free Solo* promotes. In *The Spectacle of Free Solo*, Joseph E. Taylor III

contends that Honnold's image and the narrative that image aims to produce is inseparable from systems of sponsorship, branding, and corporate support. He writes that Honnold, committed to a "dirtbag" self-concept, is stripped of it via his "material reality" (Taylor 372). In fact, Honnold "has a fully stocked camper van" and earns "the equivalent of a 'moderately successful dentist,'" "Other people carry his cameras," who then record an endeavor effectively "bankrolled by media companies, including the National Geographic society, which established the climbing genre and its cliches" (373). All of these factors push forth an even stronger destabilization of the fiction of a pure, self-made figure in Honnold. He does not operate outside of institutional and logistical support, no matter how austere or disconnected the film and he himself try to portray. What is finally fully developed on screen, then, is a representation of a precarious ideological image complicated by its position within a broad set of industrial, financial, and logistical conditions.

These kinds of contradictions populate the broad structural tradition of the sports documentary, thus reflecting an ideological tendency stemming from formal and narrative elements of the genre's typical structure. Taylor contends that *Free Solo* gives a "long look at the calculations and costs of sponsored sport," foregrounding a "symbiotic relationship between elite athletes and outdoor industry" (372; Duggal qtd. in Taylor 373). The industry and governing bodies portrayed in sports documentaries "enable [athletes] to test limits" while showcasing the unbalanced nature of the risks and rewards associated with those endeavors. Honnold's ascent is ostensibly converted into what he calls "the commodification of actuarial suicide," staged within an economy of spectacle and mythic allure of the individual (374). In this way, the contradiction at the heart of the genre becomes clear in *Free Solo*. Promised images of solitary excellence

become bound to those industrial structures, risk economies, and spectatorial activity that undo that very myth-making ideal those images chase.

All together, these sequences and surrounding discourses exhibit the fact that *Free Solo* fails to sustain the very fantasy of autonomous achievement it attempts to construct. The film's initial images, through Currie's lens, authenticate Honnold's ascent if only by concealing the collective labor that made his visibility possible. Later, when the possibility of on-camera death and the ethical concerns implied therein surface, this concealment falls apart and their appearance becomes evidence of a significant meditation within the film's fabric itself. Moreover, the industrial apparatus that more broadly surrounds those elements reveals the cracks in the myth of the individual. Additionally, the complicated spectatorship involved in appraising this myth implicate the viewer in an inherently conflicted diegesis. Honnold's presence as a subject whose "expressive individualism" becomes increasingly more complicated by the presence of the camera plays a key role in making that crack a complete rupture. His climb, while ultimately successful, is tainted by the film's exposure of its now conditions of production and reception. As a result, the film repeatedly destabilizes the genre's investment in the unmediated athletic image by revealing its own formal strategies, its ideological and political dimensions, and how ethically fraught Honnold's ascent really is. The dilemma extends throughout the sports documentary form itself, wherein the genre's promise of the unmediated becomes undermined by the collective, the mediated, and the omitted.

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