

The YouTubable Climb: Imaginary Identities, Non-Places, and the Aesthetics of the Zany



YouTubabilen vzpon: imaginarna identiteta,
nekraji in estetika norčavosti

Blaž Bajič

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ABSTRACT

The article examines how social media, particularly YouTube, frame the representation of identity, place, and performance. Social media, with their reliance on algorithmic infrastructures, transform these representations into (hy-per)versions of the self, non-places, and performances of performances. The very fact of being produced, circulated and consumed via social media places them in the broader context of late capitalism.

KEYWORDS: YouTube, social media, climbing, digital aestheticization, outdoor adventure sports, nature

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek proučuje, kako družbeni mediji, zlasti YouTube, uokvirjajo predstavitev identitete, kraja in nastopanja. Družbeni mediji, ki se zanašajo na algoritemske infrastrukture, jih spreminjajo v (hi-per)verzije jaza, nekrajev in izvajanje izvajanja. Že samo dejstvo, da so proizvedeni, spravljani v obtok in konzumirani prek družbenih medijev, jih veže na širši kontekst poznega kapitalizma.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: YouTube, družbeni mediji, plezanje, digitalna estetizacija, adrenalinski športi, narava

TO SET THE SCENE

A muscular long-haired man is dangling by his fingertips on a steeply overhanging rock face high above dark turquoise water. No protection, except the water some 20 metres below. His face suggests that he is struggling to hang on and the fingers of his right hand appear to be bleeding. How did he manage to get himself into this situation? Will he manage to finish the climb? What if he falls?

BLAŽ BAJIČ

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Photo 1: Chris Sharma during his first ascent of Es Pontás (Reel Rock, 2021)

This is the thumbnail of a video posted on the online video sharing platform YouTube, of the American climber Chris Sharma's first ascent of the Es Pontás route on the eponymous rock formation off the coast of Mallorca, and the questions that might impose themselves upon the viewer. One can hardly resist clicking on the thumbnail and watching the footage.

In the first minute of the footage of “[o]ne of the most beautiful and outrageous rock climbs ever filmed” (Reel Rock 2021), Sharma climbs calmly, gripping and stepping on barely existent hand- and footholds, while the waves pound the base of the stone arch. He soon positions himself into a stance reminiscent of a sprinter's starting posture. Suddenly, Sharma lunges more than two metres upwards, attempting – but ultimately failing – to grab a fissure in the rock face. The attempt ends with Sharma falling back first into the roaring sea. It took Sharma, arguably the best rock climber in the world in 2006, more than 50 attempts to finally complete “the ultimate ‘King Line’” (Reel Rock 2021).

The footage of Sharma attempting the Es Pontás *deep-water solo* route paradigmatically embodies what is colloquially known as “YouTubable”.¹ The most popular definition of YouTubable on Urban Dictionary, a crowdsourced online dictionary defining slang words, phrases, and contemporary terms, often with humorous or informal explanations, describes the term as “an action that is so remarkable or spectacular, that it's worthy of being filmed and posted on YouTube,” adding that the term “applies especially to a sport move” (Urban Dictionary 2011). Even a cursory review of sporting situa-

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Deep-water solo, or DWS, is a style of free climbing where the climber moves over the rock without any aid or protective equipment other than the water below.

tions on the video-sharing platform suggests that many YouTunable actions – the footage of Sharma’s climb being a case in point – take place in what is conventionally termed nature. Moreover, it is not unusual that the locations where these actions take place are themselves perceived as YouTunable – the Es Pontás stone-arch, too, being exemplary.

Amongst a multitude of climbers and other practitioners of “adventure sports” (Breivik 2010) who present their activities online, I have chosen the example of Chris Sharma to introduce this article for two principal reasons. First, as far as climbing goes, he has been among the most important popularisers of the sport in the last twenty or so years, and his sharing of carefully curated content online has been paradigmatic by being one of the first professional climbers with his own channel on YouTube.² Second, he has outspokenly advocated for a more “harmonious” relationship with nature, claiming that adventure sports engender a personal connection to nature and thus an opportunity for personal growth, and utilising his (social) media activities and exposure to promote these values. In this article, however, I am not concerned with climbing “rock stars” *per se*, nor with any other social media adventure sports influencer whose work might generate tens or even hundreds of thousands of views, where comparatively substantial investments and profits are made. My interest lies with the much more modest, yet structurally comparable social media engagement of climbing “content makers” (cf. Bajić 2024: 54, fn. 8). More specifically, my focus is on the category of the YouTunable and its possible, indeed preferred constituents, and ways of representing them, namely identity, place, and performance, and how outdoor adventure content creators deal with them. I argue that the very fact that they are re-imagined and de-centred via social media, combining imagery and algorithmic infrastructures, fundamentally reshapes their character, converting them into a specific (hy-per)version of one’s identity (Božić Vrbanić 2025; Kozorog 2024), de-territorialising them as non-places (Augé 1995; Dickinson 2011) and infusing the performance with zany aesthetics (Ngai 2012).

In what follows, I thematise these “ingredients” of digital aestheticization in/of the outdoors as it appears on YouTube, and elaborate on three climbing content creators’ reflections of their practice. I conclude by considering some of the ramifications of the YouTunable. Through these successive sections, I will attempt to address the question of how climbing content creators, by climbing and by representing climbing, create their identities and their (non-)places. First, however, allow me to briefly describe how I came to be interested in the topic and how I addressed the subject ethnographically.

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An important caveat: like other professional climbers, Sharma is often backed up by professional production teams rather than relying on his own know-how and, moreover, is nearly exclusively focused on his “outdoor projects”. In the last five or so years, a trend of “climbing youtubers” who produce all of their content either themselves or with a group of friends has emerged. However, many concentrate on indoor gym climbing and would themselves most probably emphasize other climbers as crucial trendsetters. A select few have become so successful that content creation has become their fulltime occupation, while others utilise it to promote their other business ventures (coaching, gyms, climbing equipment, outdoor tours, etc.), and professional athletes align with the trend to promote their sponsors and their achievements. The majority, however, use online social platforms simply to “share their passion with the climbing community”, as the popular phrasing goes. According to some practitioners of the sport, the worlds of outdoor and indoor climbing are drifting further and further apart (Camoletto and Marcelli 2020). While there is some truth to this claim, there is, at least online, also considerable overlap and fluidity in “the community” (with some also venturing into more general lifestyle and fitness territory).

BETWEEN A ROCK FACE AND A COMPUTER SCREEN:
A SHORT (AUTO)ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTE

As I wanted to capture the process of creation of the YouTubable as it unfolds in outdoor adventure sports, it was important to move betwixt and between nature and (online) culture. Thus, I attempted to conduct what Liz Przybylski (2020) terms hybrid ethnography. According to Przybylski, fieldwork in a post-digital world (Berry 2014) “requires a conceptual shift in ethnography” (Przybylski 2020: 4). While I appreciate her argument, I am not entirely convinced that she managed to adequately pin-point the shift, as the notion that as we – as do our interlocutors – traverse and are simultaneously positioned in multiple social roles and spatio-temporal frameworks is hardly new, or necessarily related to questions of our online and offline worlds. Furthermore, she emphasizes that researching “digital-physical space require[s] more than an additive methodology” (Przybylski 2020: 6). While I am, again, supportive of her argument, it is not entirely clear in what way hybrid ethnography diverges from “an additive methodology”.

Perhaps one possible solution is, firstly, to take the notion of a hybrid field seriously, that is, conceive it as a life-world, notwithstanding our interlocutors’ claims about the gap between the online and the offline and their actual practice of integrating the two. After all, as Malinowski already claimed, “[social] reality [is] located somewhere in the gap between ideal and real, between what people say they do and what they actually do” (Baker 1987: 21). Now, I by no means mean to align these two distinctions or to imply that the offline is real while the online is not. The online is, if anything, “more real” than the offline, since it is there that our fantasies play out most intensely today (Žižek 2006). What I do mean to argue is that we need to truly accept that, to quote David M. Berry, we have entered a (new kind of) world, where the online (and the digital more broadly) is “completely bound up with and constitutive of everyday life” (Berry 2014: 3; see also Zavrtnik in Svetel 2021). So, rather than a hybrid world or field, we need to acknowledge that we are dealing with a full-blooded world. Secondly, without denying the need for further methodological experimentation, perhaps the way forward is to go backwards, to add by subtracting. The core of ethnography, as Przybylski herself acknowledges, remains unchanged, namely “patient observation of and participation in interactions” (Przybylski 2020: 7). Moreover, ethnography has always encompassed – and added into its rather heterodox mix – various techniques, whose results are sometimes contradictory, as is social reality itself. Recognising a “new”, full-blooded world and a core of ethnography should, however, by no means be understood as an attempt at totalisation or an “integration” of diverse forms of “data”. On the contrary, it should be seen, as I hope to show below, as an endeavour to point out the gaps from within it corresponding to the gaps in the social reality.

How, then, did I, in a more practical sense, conduct my conventional ethnography? Between June 2023 and September 2024, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews and six ethnographic “walks” almost exclusively with people with a vested interest in digital aestheticization, e.g. online content creators, or influencers, people employed in outdoor

adventure tourism, and also had, whilst climbing and hiking, countless informal conversations with more casual prosumers of online content. A significant number of these activities took place in the Alpine regions of Solčavsko, Bohinj, and Pokljuka in Slovenia, as well as on Croatia's Dugi otok island and in Paklenica gorge, the country's "climbing Mecca". Paradoxically, however, the locations as such turned out to be rather irrelevant. Despite the often-emphasized *genius loci* of these places (or virtually any other place one might gaze upon on "climbing YouTube", such as Vranjača Cave described below), the depiction on social media, as I argue below, not only reduced them to a setting for content creators to "be there" and present a curated image of themselves (Lobo 2023: 6), but displaced or de-territorialised them into non-places (Augé 1995; Dickinson 2011). For example, ethnographic "walks" (I put the word "walks" in quotation marks as they encompassed, in addition to actual walking, scrambling, climbing, rappelling, standing around and sitting), a method with which I aimed to, by moving in a specific environment with others, observe and engage with the embodied and placial cultural dynamics (see Abram 2025), showed this perfectly, as the activities were at the same time also disembodied and displaced across virtual networks through the frequent use of digital media and technologies. The "walks" were thus a research method and a platform, constituting or enacting "hybrid" fields.

It is important to note that, in a post-digital world, the distinction between one's role as a producer and a consumer is collapsing as one's online engagement tends to contribute to the circulation of content via "invisible" networks and labour for the enterprises steering them (Dean 2010: 54). By promoting certain aesthetics, these networks shape prosumers' perceptions, tastes, and sensibilities, which they in turn continue to reproduce in their own digital aesthetization. It was crucial for me to regularly and systematically experience the workings of these networks as much as possible, sometimes by following and sometimes by contributing to the relevant hashtag markers, profiles, and platforms on social networks, as well as on more specialised websites, many of which include at least some aspects of social networks (posting comments, photos, videos, polling, etc.), such as 8a.nu. Related to my positioning within these networks, their effects (and affects) and the prosumers there, I must, in the spirit of autoethnography, emphasize that mountaineering has in various ways been a part of my childhood and, especially in tandem with sport climbing, a part of my leisure time especially in the last five years. While my personal history has undoubtedly contributed to certain oversights, it has also enabled me to more easily "sync" with my interlocutors and detect shifts in "structures of feeling" (Williams 1983) both online and offline.³

Before discussing how, located betwixt and between the online and the offline world, climbing content creators understand what is worth showing, I want to outline what I mean by digital aestheticization, both to better situate my interlocutors' practice as well as my own exploration of its implications.

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In public discourse in Slovenia, these shifts, reflected in the move from the "traditional" alpine culture of Sloveneness (see Šaver 2005) to a new, middle-class-oriented lifestyle and its preoccupation with self-presentation in the gaze of others, are often linked to social media (Bajič and Repič 2024). These shifts have caused veritable moral panic and protests among the self-appointed gatekeepers of "authentic" mountaineering.

How, then, should the digital aestheticization of nature be understood? What is its cultural and social “place”? Furthermore, what, if anything, should “nature” on the screen of a mobile phone or a computer mean? The aestheticization of nature is neither a new phenomenon (in fact, as Descola (2018: 99–107) pointed out, it contributed to the constitution of the very idea of nature) nor is there anything novel in the fact that this process occurs through media. For example, landscape painting has been prominent since at least the Romantic period, and the advent of mass reproduction technologies enabled the mass distribution of landscape imagery (e.g. with postcards) in the late 19th and early 20th century (Löfgren 1999). Affordable technologies later ostensibly democratised the process (Grebowicz 2015: 8–9). While digital aestheticization of nature retains all of these aspects, it is re-defined by three key factors, namely its embeddedness in algorithmic and/or AI structures, its integration into late capitalism, and its occurrence amid a growing awareness of environmental fragility (Dominguez Rubio 2023). Here, I will limit my discussion to the first two.

Social media are not neutral repositories of images. Writing about YouTube, Michael Strangelove argued that “it is an intense emotional experience”, “a social space” and a “virtual community [that] reflects the cultural politics of the present times” (Strangelove 2010: 4). Much has changed since social media began in the early 2000s, however. In only a few short years, algorithms became more sophisticated and central to the functioning of social media platforms. Curating feeds – promoting content and advancing commercial posts, insofar as the distinction can even be made – based on user browsing history and interconnections, algorithms ensure that users see what they want to see (even if the users might not realise it), whilst staying invisible themselves. As Mark Andrejevic (in Božić-Vrbančić 2025) notes, optimised for profit, algorithms often know users better than they know themselves. Thus, algorithms regulate – simultaneously produce and consume – interests. By relying on images rather than language, that is, on the Imaginary rather than the Symbolic, social media reduce desire to demand (Fink 1995) and create a kind of a closed, “psychotic” world of mimesis. Immersed in it, users can only experience immediate satisfaction and rehash it again and again (Božić-Vrbančić 2025). For instance, once one begins showing an interest in climbing or other outdoor adventure activities, one’s YouTube feed will soon be inundated with climbing content – from videos of top practitioners scaling the most laborious routes to “crews” goofing around at their local gyms, from trainers presenting the latest training regimen to athletes discussing their favourite pieces of equipment, and lastly, videos combining all of these – and then some.

Regulated as it might be by algorithmic infrastructures, how precisely is social media imagery connected to late capitalism and how does it affect its prosumers? According to the cultural theorist Sianne Ngai (2012), diverse aesthetics are always connected with specific socio-cultural conditions. Ngai identifies three “minor” aesthetics as being emblematic of late capitalism: the cute, the interesting and – particularly relevant for the present argument – the zany. They index consumption, circulation, and production, respectively, which are themselves taking place via digital media and technologies. These, like any aesthetic, are double-sided enti-

ties connecting perception and discourse. Each of the two sides is “saturated with affect [...] that connects them into a single spontaneous experience” (Ngai: 2022: n.p.). In short, aesthetics – shaped by the socio-cultural conditions of their emergence as “sensuous, affective reflections of the ways in which contemporary subjects work, exchange, and consume” (Ngai 2012: 1) – frame how we relate to and experience the world, including what we commonly call “nature” (Carruth and Marzec 2014: 207), as well as our understanding of ourselves and others. Something similar, I suggest, goes for the category colloquially known as the YouTubable. While not limited to social media, digital aestheticization, in short, stands for the algorithmically-decentred yet “personalised” process of producing, circulating and consuming (through) specific aesthetics, thus shaping perceptions, tastes, and sensibilities, while effectively suppressing expressions that depart from the established, commercially successful forms (Lobo 2023: 7).

How, then, does nature fit into the picture? According to Mia Bennett (2020), there is a world of difference between relating to an environment, for example, as “picturesque” rather than as “beautiful” (or perhaps as “YouTubable”?). There are implicit politics of aesthetics that social media either advance or impede (both, generally, to sustain profit maximisation) (Grebowicz 2014). As indicated above, social media content dealing with climbing and other outdoor adventure activities often presents these practices as done “in nature”⁴ and thus, intentionally or not, constructs a particular (imagery of) nature.⁵ While there are perhaps small differences (and getting smaller)⁶ between the various platforms, with one

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“Nature” is notoriously hard to define, and its cultural meanings change through time and space, if the notion is to be found at all (Descola 2018; Soper 1995). For the purposes of this paper, I want to note, following Miha Kozorog (2015), that in contexts of everyday life and outdoor adventure activities in particular, the question of (defining) nature is rarely raised. If anything, debates focus on its – more or less gradual – frontiers, while nature as such is presumed to exist. Hence, a heuristic and an ethnographic point need to be made. Firstly, as nature is culturally associated with specific environments out of doors, e.g. sea cliffs or mountains, it would be more appropriate to talk about more or less autogenic environments (Kozorog 2015: 117, fn. 1). However, since in “outdoor discourse” nature functions as a master signifier, I have decided to appropriate this emic notion. Secondly, because nature is taken to exist (to have it laws, to constitute an order, to always win, etc.), curative and normative dimensions are often assumed, providing an antithesis to the monotony of everyday urban life; moreover, nature comes to ensure ontological certainty, a balance established beyond and despite human hubris.

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Similar processes of curated portrayals, of course, took place apropos outdoor adventure activities long before the advent of social media. At the expense of getting ahead of myself, the production of (images of) nature in its different guises included the construction of both those venturing and living “there” (see Bajić 2014; Cronon 1995; Grebowicz 2015, 2021; Istenič and Kozorog 2014; Kozorog 2015; Ortner 1999; Vivanco and Gordon 2006). However, despite the similar, or at times arguably the same images of self and the other, I would claim that earlier forms of the outdoor production of nature implied a different subject position. (Božić-Vrbančić 2025)

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An important reason for diminishing social media diversity is, of course, growing oligopolistic control, with large tech corporations, such as Alphabet and Meta, owning and controlling the most influential and popular platforms, spanning and integrating social media, search engines, e-commerce, cloud computing, advertising, and more. The more “subcultural” corners of the online universe are not immune to this process. A case in point is the example of the 8a.nu platform. It began in 1999 as a local sports climbing site for the Gothenborg area. Aiming to develop a system that would make climbing measurable, incorporating scoring, comparison and ranking, it then grew to become the largest climbing database, now incorporating forums, image and video sharing capabilities, location tagging and sharing, training-logs and the like. In 2017, the site was acquired by Vertical Life Inc., “the world’s largest platform for climbing with the goal of connecting all participants within the community. VL’s services include an application for climbers, the Smart Climbing Gym concept for gym and route setting management, the Smart Scorecard competition scoring service, and Smart Quickdraw for ascent tracking” (Vertical Life 2024). Since then, 8a.nu has been promoting more commercial content than ever before, including a subscription-only “premium” version of the app.

designed primarily for stills, another for moving pictures, and with slightly different ways of connecting with other users, distinct algorithms and modes for catering content, etc., they all have their fundamental operation (besides profit maximisation) in common. They enable their users to share their “experiences” with others and, by presenting oneself whilst engaging in a distinct practice, also presenting distinct environments as specific landscapes. On its own, the environment “is an indeterminate object; it almost always contains enough diversity to allow the eye a great liberty in selecting, emphasizing, and grouping its elements, and it is furthermore rich in suggestion and in vague emotional stimulus. A landscape to be seen has to be composed” (Santayana in Lobo 2023: 4). It is composed, of course, via a process of technological and aesthetic mediation. By affording users precisely such mediation, social media help to reimagine both oneself as a specific personality (e.g. to construct one’s self as adventurous, bold, determined, “crazy” or remarkably physically fit) and environments as specific landscapes (e.g. as “adventurescapes”, as places “offering something beyond the routine of everyday life; that is, adventure” (Poljak Istenič and Kozorog 2014: 40)). In short, they enable “identity adventures” (Urbain in Poljak Istenič and Kozorog 2014: 41) both online, offline, and in-between, as Liz Przybylski (2020) would put it.

There is, in principle, a myriad of identities, practices and landscapes one can associate with and (co-)produce – or is merely choose? – through social media. We need to bear in mind that the notion of adventure, much like the aesthetization of nature, has a long and varied history, including exploration (and conquest), naturalism, travel writing, and the tourism industry (Beams, Mackie and Atencio 2019; Breivik 2010; Grebowicz 2015; Wheaton 2013). In their contemporary, late-modern form, adventure activities began in the late 1960s, mostly originating from the USA, and were brought to Europe by American entrepreneurs (Bourdieu 1984: 220–223). While they initially developed out of the countercultural movements to whose “spirit” they still refer, claiming authenticity and originality, they now primarily present a venue for consumerist, (white) middle-class reflective construction and representation of selves and landscapes (Wheaton 2013). Moreover, with its move onto social media, this venue is becoming increasingly dependent on, and subjected to, the vagaries of algorithmic infrastructures that, as suggested, discourage cultural forms deviating from the established, commercially successful designs. For this reason, the majority of content creators, commercially oriented or not, conscientiously (and oft-times unwittingly) follow the same thematic, directorial, visual, narrative, and affective tropes when creating and presenting images of themselves, places, and their actions. In other words, I am suggesting that social media, YouTube being exemplary, encourage a specific performance of performance. This “second order” performance infuses sporting performances with a particular aesthetic, namely one of zaniness. Following Ngai, this “aesthetic of action” is “[i]ntensely affective and physical,” to the point that even the most strenuous, indeed dangerous activities appear amusing or “crazy” (2012: 182). It introduces an aura of fun to hard work, thus indexing broader transformations in our cultural relation to production (Ngai 2012: 181–184). In short, with zany aesthetics, not only is outdoor adventure sporting performance remade as entertainment, it has come to accommodate the cultural notion that “gain and pain” inextricably go together.

Building on the reflections of the previous section, the following subsections focus on the three key components of the YouTubable – identity, place (or nature), and performance. I continue by ethnographically exploring how climbing content creators navigate the ambiguities and incongruities that arise as these themes intertwine within the realm of social media.

Identity on the rocks

Clicking on any of the videos posted on Aljaž Žnidaršič's YouTube profile, one is instantly struck with a slew of fast cuts (and energetic rock music): two climbers traversing a snowy ridge high above the clouds, a point-of-view shot of someone crossing a sharp rocky crest on the edge of a precipice, an alpinist struggling up a steep snowy slope, and finally, another point-of-view shot of a person toasting with a drink and gesticulating towards Aljaž Tower,⁷ as if to say: "I am at the top!" Five seconds in, thanks to the scrolling captions, one also learns that "your expedition is your story". Expedition Story is, as the emerging logo leads the viewer to believe, Žnidaršič's business and/or online "avatar". Indeed, as the professional videographer, photographer and alpinist-in-training has confirmed, his YouTube channel as well as his Instagram profile serve one purpose: self-promotion. In his case, self-promotion has to be understood in two inextricably linked senses: promotion of his services (performances?) and promotion of his self. On Expedition Story's webpage, in addition to his portfolio, there is also a self-presentation of Žnidaršič: "My primary motivation is to live a full life, rich with stories to tell. My love for nature drives me to spend as much time outdoors as possible [...]. Nature fills me with energy and inspiration, which is reflected in my work" (Expedition Story 2024). He goes on to emphasize that he most admires "nature and people who strive for progress and personal or professional growth". In his free time, too, he engages "in activities such as mountaineering, hiking, guiding, diving, and sailing. These activities further connect me with nature and strengthen my creative spirit" (Expedition Story 2024). It appears, then, that nature and activities of personal and professional growth somehow correlate.

During one of our conversations, he attributed his personal and professional activities to his upbringing, as his parents would take him into the mountains and encourage him to climb. Much of Žnidaršič's self-presentation is already reflected in the intro of any of his YouTube videos – which in itself poses the question of the (disappearing) boundaries between labour and leisure (see below). In any case, his videos typically feature shots of waking up early, driving through harsh conditions to reach the start of the tour, the gruelling approach, goofing around with his companions, point-of-view cap-

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Aljaž Tower (Slovenian: Aljažev stolp) is a tower-shaped storm shelter and triangulation point located at the summit of Mount Triglav. Constructed in 1895 by Jakob Aljaž, a priest from Dovje, the tower serves as a significant national symbol of Slovenian identity and is closely associated with Mount Triglav as a landmark of Slovenia. Currently, the tower is state-owned, maintained by the Ljubljana Matica Alpine Club, and situated on land owned by the Municipality of Bohinj.

tures of the “action” – like negotiating a perilous rock face or scaling an ice-covered peak – interspersed with more introspective confessionals and meditative moments.⁸ Then, amid the frantic and risky activities, a picturesque view of the landscape suddenly appears or there is a cinematic drone shot gliding above the couloirs and the crags.

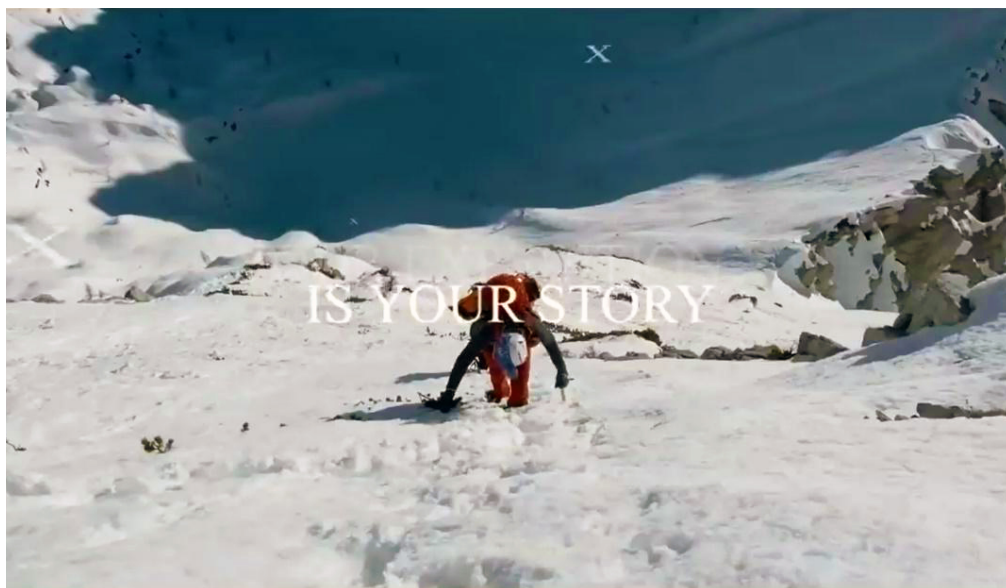


Photo 2: A print screen of the opening of Aljaž Žnidarič's YouTube video *Triglav – We found Grandfather Frost* (Aljaž Žnidarič 2022).

Now, if one were to simply see Žnidarič's work of self-presentation as a mere “marketing stunt”, presenting an image of himself based on his presupposition of how others (should or desire to) see him – determined, bold, proficient, but also upbeat, reflective and thoughtful, an image behind which a “real” self persists, one would, I believe, miss the point. While this is undoubtedly part of the picture, for Žnidarič the image is himself. In his work, he aims to show his genuine self – his outlook on life, his authentic experiences, his true feelings. He explained that to achieve this, he experimented at length with different techniques and technologies. “With the kind of pictures [that might be digitally altered in post-production] that I make now,” Žnidarič emphasized, “I’m the closest I’ve ever been to [capturing] my feelings on the tour itself, on the location itself.” He openly admits that he carefully curates his online brand-persona, crafting it into an upbeat, joyful individual focused nearly exclusively on climbing and mountaineering, purposefully leaving out potential “bad

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Confessionals are a stylistic device commonly employed in reality television and function as a type of aside by presenting cutaways to close-up shots of one or more cast members speaking directly to the camera. These segments are used to deliver narration, exposition, and personal commentary on the events unfolding on the show. Žnidarič, like many other content creators, regularly begins his videos with such confessionals, thus breaking the fourth wall – and connecting with “the community” – from the start.

days” and other activities he might otherwise be interested in. The selected images are a prosthesis of his identity (Lury 2004). Nevertheless, he does not see this practice as one of staging or pretending because, as he puts it, he is sincerely captivated by the mountains and is “an optimist by nature and ha[s] an optimistic outlook on things” (Žnidaršič 2024). His point, in short, is that in his work of self-promotion, he does not present a fake self, but is rather disavowing any “negative” aspects – he publicises and advances a partial real self. This (hy-per)version of himself is his “positive face” (Kozorog 2024), not only an image formed through his presupposition of how others view him, but also a part, the essence of his imaginary identity, of what he, to himself, is. An identity that is actualised outdoors, “in nature” (mediated via YouTube or Instagram).

Nevertheless, we should not forget that in late capitalism, particularly in the creative industries and in the digital economy, where videographers and online content creators such as Žnidaršič are trying to make a living, labourers are compelled to take a leap of faith to succeed – which includes the creative expression or invention of their true selves (Bajič 2017: 195). They are structurally posited in such a way that the image of the risk-loving, extra-calculative “entrepreneur” literally makes sense (no wonder that climbing is becoming increasingly popular among young creative professionals); apropos the content creators it is important to note, then, that the move from self-presentation to the entrepreneur of the self (Christiaens 2019; see also Lazzarato 2012) designates a shift from a self as a value to a value producing self.

Between a rock and a non-place

Hrvoje Grancarić is an avid rock climber in his early forties, a crag developer and topo designer, as well as a frequent social media user that primarily posts his climbing performances. Based in Zadar, where he also heads the local sport climbing club Paklenica, Grancarić alluded to a peculiar paradox when discussing the difference between indoor gym climbing and outdoor climbing “in nature” on “real rock”:

So, in climbing there is indoor climbing, which is becoming more and more popular. And there is climbing in nature. These are two different worlds. So, the new generations, relatively speaking, mostly climb in gyms. And they perceive it as some kind of fitness, crossfit, some type of exercise, which is convenient for them in those urban milieus [*urbanih sredinab*]. They don't even want to go [climb outdoors], they're not so much [interested] in nature, it's not that big of a factor for them. Because climbing, let's not forget, is a dangerous sport and is not for everyone. A mistake costs dearly. And some have problems with the fear of heights. But, having said that, climbing in nature provides all this ... It means a break from these urban milieus ... So, it's such a *Zen* for me. We come to nature. And if you have a bad climbing day, if you don't climb [anything noteworthy], just the fact that you spent six, eight, ten hours in nature, that is your reward. You get to go to such crazy locations. Let's say, one of the very attractive, new locations, which I will go to tomorrow, if everything goes well, and on Sunday, is Vranjača. Vranjača Cave, where I also drilled my own route the other day. The cave is spectacular. And the world's best climber has already been there twice. What I'm saying is, photos don't do it justice. (Grancarić, 2024)

The paradox implicit in Grancarić's words concerns relationships with and attitudes towards specific places and their character, or rather the lack thereof. He is touching on non-places found not indoors, but, against expectations, outdoors, "in nature". Claiming that an indoor climbing gym, the kind which today can be found just about anywhere (Camoletto and Marcelli 2020), is not "formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living" but rather "creates the shared identity of [ascensionists], customers or Sunday [climbers]", to (mis)quote Marc Augé (1995: 101), would be to state the obvious. However, Grancarić's mention of the world's best climber – he is referring to the Czech climber Adam Ondra – suggests that climbing outdoors is likewise a (near) global phenomenon, with climbers travelling all over the world to temporarily stop at particular spots and, well, climb some rocks. For Grancarić, Vranjača may indeed be what is termed a "home crag" in climbing jargon. For Ondra and a multitude of other climbers, not only professional athletes but globetrotting YouTuber climbers and vacationers, however, Vranjača, like any other crag, represents just another special place, an "outdoor playground" (Bell in Poljak Istenič and Kozorog 2014: 42), an "adventurescape" (Poljak Istenič and Kozorog 2014), imagined through both a "traditional" mixture of notions of wilderness and, of course, nature as removed from frantic everyday life, and the more contemporary social media portrayals of the outdoors as destinations for self-actualisation (Božić-Vrbančić 2025), lifestyle authenticity (Rickly-Boyd 2012), and digital escape (Miller and Horst 2014: 12–15). In fact, Ondra himself published a video of his second visit to Vranjača which featured his ascent of the extremely difficult route *B je to!*, making the video also extremely YouTubable and attention-grabbing in the online climbing community. He thus contributed to constructing the cave as a rock climbing area for people everywhere, whilst simultaneously making that place a nowhere.



Photo 3: Adam Ondra's ascent of *B je to!* in Vranjača Cave as shown in the YouTube video Hardest Route in Croatia - *B je to!* 9b | *Commented Climb by Adam Ondra* (Adam Ondra, 2023).

With the advent of climbing social media, within the online climbing community, it is no longer simply that we are “displaced in nature” (Dickinson 2011) through a network of routes, topoi, ethics, i.e. more or less global rules of conduct among climbers, governing climbing itself, care for the rock, equipment, and the like. Today we are displaced (and disciplined), or de-territorialised, as are the places themselves, via social media imagery (from drone-produced videos and digital augmentation to GPS tracks and positioning-apps), algorithmic structures, scoring and ranking games, whereby imagery and affective intensities, or, in a word, aesthetics, take on greater importance in our activities (Dean 2010: 21–22). The imagery in Ondra’s video is indeed spectacular. It shows him climbing near the limit of what is (currently seen as) humanly possible in “an impressive cave of Vranjača in Croatia” (Adam Ondra 2023). The video is exemplary in displaying how persons within specific settings are captured and contextualised, turning the former into performers and displacing the latter into non-places. Such places are chosen for their ability to become YouTubable non-places – unique, attractive, spectacular, yet generic, homely, typical. During one of his confessionals in the video, Ondra is sitting in front of a rock face and states: “I’m here.” He is, of course, refereeing to Vranjača, and watching the video, one is led to believe that he is sitting somewhere in front of the cave. Ondra, however, made his confessionals in the crag of Ter, just south of Solčavsko, in the foothills of the Kamnik-Savinja Alps (which I was able to recognise thanks to the kerosene lamp hanging on the wall of what used to be my home crag).

As Senka Božić-Vrbanić (2025) has shown, as places, Vranjača or Ter hardly being exceptions, are displaced thorough hypercommodified, algorithmically programmed conditions of communicative capitalism, they become destinations we can never reach (yet, in one form or another, increasingly often pay to enter, and are thus sources of monopoly rents (Harvey 2002)). Nevertheless, once we do (not) reach them, we are expected to have fun and work there.

Labouring on the wall

The productions of many a climbing content creator on YouTube often include extended scenes of shenanigans, gags, practical jokes, pranks, or simply the content creator goofing around with friends on and off the wall. Perhaps even more importantly, these scenes are usually staged in such a way that the viewer feels as if they are there, joining in the liveliness as a member of the “crew”. Indeed, the viewer is often directly addressed, discursively and visually, and is even invited to try certain exercises, feats or workouts and subsequently post their results and/or videos in the comments. However, the shenanigans may be, and frequently they indeed are, instantly swapped for, interspersed with or nearly imperceptibly substituted with much more serious matters, if the two were distinct at all in the first place as the intensity of the performances themselves may appear comical: climbers “trying hard” on their boulders, “working the problem” of the route, “having a session” on the wall, “following a protocol” of exercise, or even “pushing the grade” of what is possible. These, in turn, regularly turn into laboured grunting or frustrated screams, only to begin joking anew.

The highly informal character of both the content and the form, as well as the ambiguity between the playfulness and the drudgery of climbing embody what Sianne Ngai (2012) described as the aesthetics of the zany. According to her, the zany indexes the “politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring” (Ngai 2012: 182). With it, “action [can be] pushed to physically strenuous extremes”, and “an intensely willing and desiring subjectivity” is presupposed (Ngai 2012: 184). The former, in the present context, is obviously epitomised by the climbing itself, the latter in the recurrent underscoring of the importance to have fun and enjoy yourself, the need to want “it” badly, or in short, the significance of the “psyche” (cf. Wheaton 2013).

While amongst the more moderate climbing content creators as far as zaniness goes, Rudi Nadlučnik, who posts on his YouTube channel under the moniker Alpine Boyz, nevertheless, and rather spontaneously, replicates all the tropes of this style. The reason for the moderate approach is perhaps related to the fact that his videos are marked by his place of employment, an outdoor adventure activities and camping agency, or that, as he puts it, his primary audience is himself when he reaches old age. At any rate, his videos tend to combine footage of laborious approaches and daring ascents usually in his “backyard” mountains in the Kamnik-Savinja Alps, above Logar Valley and Roban Cirque, in particular, sometimes even done in *free solo style*,⁹ interspersed with more mellow situations of joking around with the viewer or with his companions while driving, on the walk-in, during sledding on the snow-covered slopes, or simply while having a snack somewhere safe.

Interestingly, when reflecting on his past work, Nadlučnik mentioned as “special” a video he did not manage to record due to technical difficulties with his recording equipment. What he thus missed were the technical difficulties of the climb itself.

I almost regret not being able to record that pitch. My camera had broken down just when it would have been perfect to capture something on video. It was one of those times when I couldn't record the hardest part of the route – right there where it would have been amazing to see something. This was at the exit from the Ridge of Mala Rinka Mountain. The snow was unprocessed [i.e. not compact], I had to clear everything myself, and those 40 meters took me an hour, maybe an hour and a half. It was technically demanding, and I had to use every bit of knowledge I had, improvising any way I could to pull myself out. I was literally clawing at the rock, with everything buried in untouched snow. [...] When Jakob and I climbed it, I remember thinking, ‘Will I even make it through?’ [...] The biggest problem was that Jakob, as the second climber, faced almost the same difficulty since I covered up everything I had cleared. Total disaster. What would normally take us the entire route, we spent on that single pitch alone – it took us 40 minutes just to get out. I couldn't record anything. I only managed to record on my phone when he came over the edge with Mrzla Gora Mountain in the background, and it was really a beautiful shot. (Nadlučnik, 2024)

Still, the video as such is imperfect, because, as the above quote from Nadlučnik suggests, it lacks the footage of the pair (zanily?) toiling on the crux pitch. Nadlučnik's frustra-

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Free solo climbing is a type of climbing where climbers climb alone without using ropes or any protective gear.

tion over the absent recording can also be understood as frustration with the flawed framing of the presented scene. It is deficient in that it does not show – merely suggests – labouring on the wall. The YouTube “short” in question is missing the key ingredient in the zany’s “mix of desperation and playfulness [that many find] so aesthetically appealing” (Ngai 2012: 188).

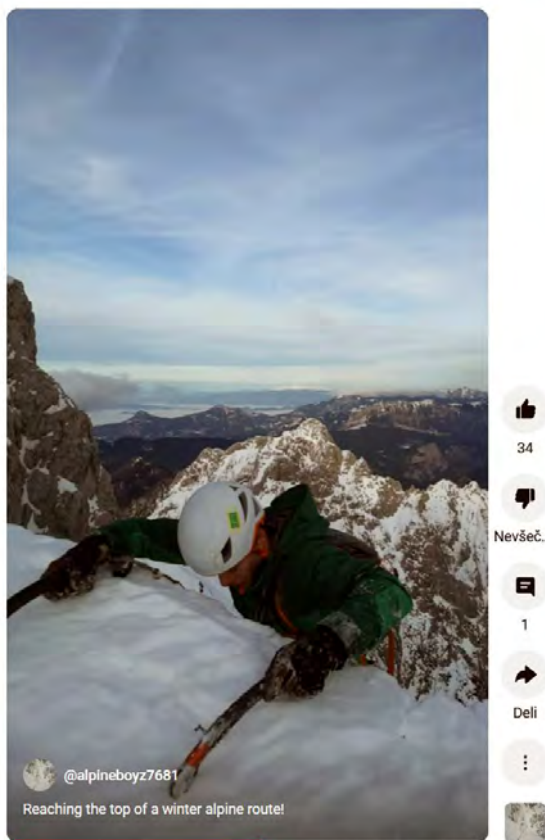


Photo 4: Alpine Boyz’ “short” of the laborious winter ascent of Mala Rinka Mountain (Alpine Boyz 2023).

Nevertheless, the question remains: why does the zany “need” to be desperate and stressed out, not only animated and frolicsome? Sianne Ngai argues that “this playful, hyper-charismatic aesthetic is really an aesthetic about work – and about a precariousness created specifically by the capitalist organization of work” (2012: 188). She cautions, however, that the zany is not “identical or reducible to capitalism but driven primarily by its contradictory logic of incessant expansion” (Ngai 2012: 188), within which, in late capitalism, one’s self is, as argued above, (re)structured as a source of value, as so-called human capital. The zany, then, is not an aesthetic “just about work, but about the ‘putting to work’ of affect and subjectivity for the generation of surplus value” (Ngai 2012: 188). Now, I am by no means suggesting that Nadlučnik’s aim – or the aim of any other interlocutor or climbing content

creator – was (self-)exploitation. Rather, I am arguing that this “short”, even if imperfectly, like so many other works on YouTube and other social media platforms, reproduces the zany aesthetics that contribute to the normalisation of the notion that hard work and play, strain and success are inextricably linked. In fact, not only that, on climbing YouTube, effort and enjoyment are completely aligned, and any attempt to separate them would come across as strange, negativistic, or quite simply as “killing the vibe”.

The paradox that speaks volumes about the historically changing relation to production is that the more the zany comes to dominate our perception, the more natural it feels, the less we are able to articulate it (Ngai 2012: 230–232) – and thus begin to change it. The passage from “feeling natural” to “natural feeling”, the correlation of “nature” and “growth” often made on social media, thus become ideologically significant in that it naturalises befitting structures of feeling, ways of conduct, and frames of thinking: aestheticized nature as a venue of play-cum-labour entices prosumers to follow “the right path” (cf. Grebowicz 2015: 18–29). However, why precisely would one desire to do so?

TO CHANGE THE SETTING

Throughout this article I have argued that through social media, with their reliance on imagery, algorithmic infrastructures, and structurally preferred aesthetics, identities, places, and performances are re-imagined and de-centred as (hy-per)version of one’s self, non-places, and performances of performances, respectively. By way of three ethnographic vignettes, each zeroing in on one aspect of the process, I have argued that social media content tends to contribute, whilst being a particularly structured and structuring space of expression, to a particular imaginary, i.e. cultural and ideological, relation to the real conditions of existence in late, “creative” capitalism (cf. Kozorog 2024). This has led me to pose one final question: why would one be taken in by such images? In other words, what does outdoor adventure imagery, including climbing, promise?

Following Timothy Morton (2007), nature can effectively be conceived as a screen: on the one hand, a canvas on which we paint our pictures, according to our own desires, and on the other hand, a veil concealing a complex system of relations, including one’s own positionality within it. It is not much different with computer and mobile phone screens. Nature, implicitly or explicitly “painted” in the social media imagery of climbing, or, I add, of outdoor adventure sports, helps content creators, and prosumers more generally, imagine their ideal selves, depicting “nature” as the scene in which these ideal selves “work hard and play hard”. Although produced retroactively, through the very use of social media (and other “machines”), nature appears as always already – naturally, so to speak – “there” (see fn. 7). As such, nature “encapsulates a potentially infinite series of disparate fantasy objects” (Morton 2007: 14), making an inquiry into its digital depictions, “Rorschach blobs of others’ enjoyment, [...] a highly appropriate way of beginning to engage with how ‘nature’ compels feelings and beliefs” (Morton 2007: 14).

If, by imagining themselves in accordance with certain images, they aim to be recognised, both by others and by oneself as adventurous, determined risk-takers who are, moreo-

ver, fully enjoying themselves, yet still respectful towards nature (*sensu* Sharma), the outdoor prosumers, by mediating these imageries via specific aesthetic categories and algorithmically infrastructures, subject themselves to the very conditions which they seek to leave behind. For while I have not dwelled on this point here, nature tends to be culturally posited as antithetical to the “normal” course of everyday life in the contemporary world (see Bajič 2014), digitally mediated ones included. Thus, we stumble upon an apparent paradox: the more one wants to “return to nature”, the more one’s practice is nowadays conditioned on, and by, digital media and technology. “Digitalised” nature is a privileged cultural space where middle-class fantasies of “escape” are played out (Miller and Horst 2012: 11–15). In other words, while the climbing or the outdoor adventure fantasy – a fantasy, i.e. the “story” through which we relate to our objects of desire, to enjoyment (Žižek 1998), thriving on social media – relates climbers to nature, promises them authenticity and escape, the “means of its production” subject them to the harsh realities of late capitalism which they are trying to escape.

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POVZETEK

Članek na primeru plezanja raziskuje, kako družbeni mediji, natančneje YouTube, vplivajo na predstavitev identitete, prostora in nastopanja pri adrenalinskih športih na prostem. Trdi, da predstavitev, ki jih oblikujejo algoritemske infrastrukture in specifične estetike, ustvarjajo »YouTubabilno« vsebino – performativna, spektakularna dejanja in kraji, optimizirani za digitalno protrošnjo. Na podlagi teh predstavitev se na novo zamišljajo identitete kot (hi-per)verzije sebe, kraji se z izgubo krajevnosti spremenijo v nekreje, nastopanje pa prežema norčava estetika, s čimer postanejo uprizoritve uprizoritev, kar izpostavlja njihovo širšo povezanost s poznokapitalistično produkcijo.

V etnografskih vinjetah so predstavljeni učinki tistega, kar je poimenovano digitalna estetizacija – algoritemsko načrtan, pa vseeno »personaliziran« proces ustvarjanja, krojenja in potrošnje določene estetike, ki kroji dožemanje, okuse in dovzetnost ter hkrati učinkovito zatira izraze, ki odstopajo od zakoreninjenih, komercialno uspešnih vzorcev. Te predstavitev so nastale na podlagi avtorjevega dolgotrajnega etnografskega raziskovanja ustvarjalcev digitalnih vsebin, s poudarkom na pustolovski dejavnosti na prostem. Črpajo iz etnografskih sprehodov, intervjujev in opazovanja z udeležbo, tako na spletu kot

v živo, pa tudi »nekje vmes« (Przybylski 2020). Prispevek na primerih ustvarjalcev vsebine o plezanju prikazuje, kako njihovo delo spaja osebne zgodbe s kulturnimi predstavami o pustolovščinah, tveganju in avtentičnosti. S kuriranjem samopredstavitev so »negativni« vidiki posameznikovega jaza odstranjeni in identitete na novo zamišljene kot (hi-per) verzije jaza. Podobno kraji, ki so bili dojeti in predstavljeni kot spektakularni ter primerni za določene prizore, potem ko jim algoritemske strukture odvzamejo krajevnost, asimptotično postajajo nekraji (Augé 1995). Nastopi pa so prežeti z norčavo estetiko, s čimer postanejo uprizoritve uprizoritev, kar kaže na njihovo širšo povezanost s poznokapitalistično produkcijo (Ngai 2012).

Prispevek na podlagi Mortona (2007) sklene, da lahko naravo vidimo kot zaslon: platno, ki odseva hrepenenja, in tančico, ki zastira relacijske kompleksnosti. Naravo lahko torej razumemo kot nekaj, kar uteleša raznorazne fantazije. Ta »digitalizirana« narava deluje kot platforma za fantazije srednjega razreda o pobegu, čeprav te fantazije – ki uspevajo na družbenih omrežjih – konec koncev navdušence nad športi na prostem postavljajo prav v to realnost poznega kapitalizma, ki ji želijo ubežati.