



TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Touching the Void

Kevin Macdonald's gripping documentary *Touching the Void* tells the story of an extraordinary escape from seemingly inevitable death. At its centre is mountaineer Joe Simpson, who at the age of 25 in 1985, with his younger climbing partner Simon Yates, successfully ascended the unclimbed west face of the remote Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes only to confront a terrifying series of disasters on the descent. Macdonald's film may come 18 years after the event and 15 years after Simpson himself achieved literary fame with the publication of his international bestseller recounting the experience – also called *Touching the Void* – but it is far from an addendum. *Touching the Void* is a vivid cinematic experience proving that the grip on narrative momentum evident in Macdonald's 1999 Oscar-winning account of the 1972 Munich Olympics hostage crisis, *One Day in September*, remains as powerful as ever.

In the film Simpson describes the 'one push' method of ascent – sleeping in ice caves rather than setting up base camps en route – as the 'purest' style of climbing and extols 'freedom from clutter' as one of the main pleasures of such endeavours. *Touching the Void's* documentary style is similarly a highly focused, clutter-free experience, mixing recently shot to-camera interviews with Simpson, Yates and Richard Hawking (who remained in a base camp) with dramatic reconstructions. The form is familiar from TV reality series such as the BBC's *999*, but Macdonald raises it to unprecedented levels of cinematic spectacle, suspense and apparent authenticity (Simpson and Yates accompanied the director to the Andes for part of the shoot). When Simpson won the Boardman Tasker Award for non-fiction in 1988 it was pointed out that no fiction writer would dare to invent so implausible a story. That may be true, but Hollywood's way with mountaineering tends to focus on superhuman prowess – think Sylvester Stallone climbing a snow-covered mountain in a vest in *Cliffhanger* or Tom Cruise dangling Spiderman-like from a peak in the opening of *Mission: Impossible II*, both enabled partly by a seamless use of digital technology. (Cruise had at one point been in the frame for a feature film version of *Touching the Void*.) The great strength of Simpson's book, though, is the immediacy of its narrative voice; as climber Chris Bonington points out in his introduction, Simpson is a rarity – not merely a risk-taking climber but a skilled writer able to describe his near-incredible survival story first hand.

Macdonald's task was to recreate that immediacy for the cinema. Instead of using passages from the book as narration, the film draws on fresh interview material to provide a running commentary and some sense of Simpson's and Yates' states of mind. Simpson must have told this story thousands of times, but the matter-of-fact description of events as he shatters his leg on the mountain and Yates attempts to lower him is even more powerful for its British understatement. Simpson, for instance, adds to the book's description of the moment when Yates abseils down the treacherous powdery cornice of snow to ask him if he's OK – the recollection that he was about, as a reflex, to say, 'I'm OK. I'm fine.' But when he reveals that he has broken his leg, both men know this is likely to be a death sentence. The question is whether it need be for both of them.

The decisions that follow are at the core of the drama – Macdonald shrewdly perceives that we need to know little about these two men beyond their reactions to the situation. Pared down to its essentials, it's as horribly compelling as the opening balloon accident in Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*, and we don't have to know a belay plate from a Prussik knot to be dragged along by it. At this point in Simpson's book his first-person narration gives way for the first time to Yates' thoughts, and in the film Yates maintains the same level of unflinching candour: 'If he fell off I could make it down the mountain alone,' he remembers thinking.

In the following passages, in which Yates inadvertently lowers Simpson over an overhanging ledge as a blizzard moves in, Macdonald's focus on recreating events as authentically as possible pays dividends. The director insisted on shooting both on the Siula Grande mountain and in the Alps, where heavy snowstorms add to the sense of isolation in which actors Brendan Mackey (as Simpson) and Nicholas Aaron (as Yates) and the stunt climbers recreate Simpson's plunge into a crevasse the size of the dome of St Paul's, and Yates' decision – still apparently controversial among mountaineers – to cut the rope connecting them. The arduousness of the shoot and the delight expressed by Macdonald in interviews on discovering that parts of the Siula Grande have never been filmed before call to mind Werner Herzog at his most adventurous. Herzog's own Bergfilm *Schrei aus Steine* (*Scream of Stone*, 1991) was a disappointment, but comparisons with his documentary *Wings of Hope* (1998), in which he returns to the Peruvian jungle with biologist Juliane Koepcke, who had miraculously survived a plane crash there, are telling for *Touching the Void's* perspective on documentary and extreme experience.

In *Wings of Hope* Herzog – like Nick Broomfield, Michael Moore and other ego-driven documeisters – becomes the subject of the film, colouring his Romantic obsession with the insoluble metaphysical mysteries of extreme survival tales with the fact that by chance he himself had missed the flight. Macdonald, instead, wants to make us feel as much of Simpson's pain and dread on the way to his extraordinary reprieve as the tools of narrative cinema allow. His shooting of the key sequence inside a real crevasse adds its own claustrophobia to Simpson's voiceover description, reminiscent of the Poe of *The Pit and the Pendulum*: 'Crevasses have a dread feel, not a place for the living ... I hung on the rope and waited to die.'

Metaphysics and mountains are inseparable even in a pragmatic British context. *Touching the Void* adds religious choral music by Thomas Tallis to its stunning mountain shots; Simpson himself credits to his battle with resignation and despair the realisation that his devout Catholicism was behind him and he was now an atheist. Apart from his prolific writing career, Simpson is successful on the corporate lecture circuit where middle managers look to him for inspiration. In the film he explains the need to continue taking decisions and to break down the seemingly impossible task of making it down the mountain alone and injured into small, achievable goals. Those of us not climbing the mountain of monthly sales targets, though, can reflect instead on the cosmic significance of Simpson not wanting to die, dehydrated and frostbitten, on a Peruvian mountain with Boney M's 'Brown Girl in the Ring' inexplicably tormenting his delirium.

Richard Falcon, *Sight & Sound*, January 2004

TOUCHING THE VOID

Director: Kevin Macdonald
©: FilmFour, Film Council
Presented by: FilmFour, Film Council
Production Company: Darlow Smithson Productions
Presented in association with/Co-financed by: Channel Four, Public Broadcasting Service
Made with the support of: UK Film Council New Cinema Fund
Executive Producers: Robin Gutch, Charles Furneaux, Paul Trijbits
Producer: John Smithson
Co-producer: Sue Summers
Line Producer: Gina Marsh
Associate Producer: Paul Sowerbutts
Production Co-ordinator: Nion Hazell
Production Accountant: James Reekie
Post-production Consultant: Stephen Barker
Production Team: Christine Baxter-Jones, Lesley Brown, Lucy Daniels, Regine Dura, Deborah McLauchlan, Jesús Montero, Emma Parsons, Faye Richardson, Gillian Strachan
Archive Research: Paul Gardner
1st Assistant Director: Nick Laws
 Casting: Susie Figgis
 Casting Assistant: Indira Ashton
Based on the book by: Joe Simpson
Director of Photography: Mike Eley
Climbing Photography: Keith Partridge
Additional Climbing Photography: Simon Wagen
Additional Photography: Dan Shoring
Unit Photographer Alps: Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert
Clapper Loader: Olly Driscoll
Gaffer: Ralph Kulike
Computer Graphics/Effects: Red Vision
Editor: Justine Wright
On-line Editor: Simon Brook
Assistant Editor: Ben Lester
Art Direction: Patrick Bill
Storyboard Artist: Giles Asbury
Costume: Patrick Bill
Make-up Design: Sarita Allison
Title Design: Howard Watkins, Gareth Tansey
HD Video to Film Transfer: LipSync Post
Music: Alex Heffes
Electronic Music: Bevan Smith

Solo Cello: Alice Neary
Orchestral Leader: Maya Magub
Orchestrator: Ian Macpherson
Music Supervisor: Abi Leland
Music Mixed by: Andy Richards
Sound Designer: Joakim Sundström
Sound Recording: Keith Partridge
Sound Recordist: Mick Duffield
Re-recording Mixer: Tim Alban
Assistant Re-recording Mixer: Richard Davey
Foley Supervisor: Anthony Faust
Foley Artist: Felicity Cottrell
Foley Editor: Robert Brazier
Climbing Double/Stunts (Joe Simpson): Dave 'Cubby' Cuthbertson
Climbing Double/Stunts (Simon Yates): Rory Gregory
Additional Reconstruction: Joe Simpson, Simon Yates
Head Mountain Guide: Brian Hall
Key Mountain Guide/Safety Team: Dave 'Cubby' Cuthbertson, John Falkiner, Rory Gregory, Paul Moores, Harry Taylor, John Whittle
Trekking Leader (Peru): Néstor Morales Flores
Climbing Support (Peru): Jorge Clemente Vargas, Hugo Milla Chinchay, Marcelino Milla Huarac, Pelayo Milla Morales, Greobardo Pascual Cori, Rodolfo Reyes Oropeza, Eloy Salazar Obregón, Juan Sánchez, Eduardo Shaún Caldúa, Pelayo Silverio Pariamachi
Climbing Support (Alps): Olly Allen, Christine Barnes, Jim Kerr, François Marsigny, Tim Rhodes, Ollie Ryall
In Memory of (Aerial Photographer): Robert Fulton
Consultants: Joe Simpson, Simon Yates
With Special thanks to: Paul Webster
Unit Publicity: Emma Chapman Publicity

With

Brendan Mackey (*Joe Simpson – reconstruction*)
Nicholas Aaron (*Simon Yates – reconstruction*)
Ollie Ryall (*Richard Hawking – reconstruction*)
Joe Simpson
Simon Yates
Richard Hawking

UK/USA 2003©
106 mins

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Scott of the Antarctic

Sun 2 Jan 12:30, Mon 24 Jan 18:00

The Conquest of Everest

Mon 3 Jan 16:10, Wed 12 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by explorer Mark Wood)

The Great White Silence

Mon 3 Jan 18:20, Sun 23 Jan 12:10

Touching the Void

Wed 5 Jan 20:30, Sun 23 Jan 18:30

The Fight for the Matterhorn

(Der Kampf ums Matterhorn)

Thu 6 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by BFI curator Bryony Dixon), Sun 23 Jan 15:20

The Red Tent (Krasnaya Palatka)

Tue 11 Jan 18:00 (+ intro by BFI curator Simon McCallum),
Sun 30 Jan 18:00

YES & NO Salon: Exploration Now

Wed 12 Jan 18:30

Encounters at the End of the World

Sat 15 Jan 15:00, Tue 25 Jan 20:30

Talk: Silent Cinema: Intrepid Women

Sun 16 Jan 15:30

To the Ends of the Earth: The Transglobe Expedition

+ Q&A with Ranulph Fiennes

Tue 18 Jan 17:45

Antarctic Crossings: Postwar shorts + intro by

BFI curator Patrick Russell

Tue 25 Jan 18:00

The Epic of Everest + live score by Simon Fisher Turner

Sat 29 Jan 19:00

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