



Heidegger and vertigo

Description

Apparently Mount Everest is so busy during climbing season you have to queue to get to the top. (See Mail Online [article](#).) Some people prefer horizontal pastimes (eg swimming), but thereâ??s something irresistible about verticality.

TV producer and scriptwriter Russell T Davies famously employed â??the vertical chaseâ?? in his *Dr Who* episodes. Characters are pursued up a stair, ladder, duct, a rope suspended from a dirigible; they shimmy along ledges, leap across gaps, and teeter on the edge. Itâ??s a common device in adventure films.

Vertical action heightens risk, tension, and danger. Think of Peter Jacksonâ??s *King Kong*, where the ape battles to save Ann Darrow from T-rex while all three fall through a ravine tangled with vines.

Super heroes also fly, glide, hang upside down, jump, fall, and catch. Some games and sports also induce, or play on, the sense of vertigo. In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois defines vertigo as

an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind (p.23).



He refers to the childish pastime of spinning around to make yourself giddy; high wire circus acts, climbing trees, and car racing. We could add skateboarding, parkour, and extreme sports and pastimes such as bungee jumping, climbing Everest and skydiving. Video games of course invite simulation of vertiginous experience, and people fly in SecondLife.

Architecture toys with vertigo: atriums in shopping malls and multi-storey hotels with 20 mm sheets of waist-high glass to protect patrons from the void, transparent lifts, and open grated flooring on bridges and gantries. The vertigo effect is not only induced by height, but seeing objects just out of reach above a gorge, looking up as well as down, and seeing crane operators, painters and window cleaners, suspended, poised, vulnerable and isolated. Vertigo connects the advantages of access and prospect with the hazards of falling, or being abandoned on a ledge no one else can reach.

Colleagues in architecture and [cultural studies](#) research the aerial view (Chmielewska, 2012). Also, Michael Benedikt invokes the feeling of hovering at a height in his account of the challenge presented by virtual reality.

Bombarded everywhere by images of opportunity and escape, the very circumstances of a free and meaningful human life have become kaleidoscopic, *vertiginous* (p.121).

Philosophers invoke height as metaphor. Derrida refers to the “bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play” (p.22), and hovering over an abyss or void “what it is to have no certainties, where the ground is taken from under you.

In a section on anxiety in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, we read about *fleeing, falling* and *grounding*, as well as being “not at home,” and the *uncanny*, key components of the philosopher’s “vertical chase.”

Extreme equipment



MSc student and novice skydiver Zongping Shi alerted me recently to a

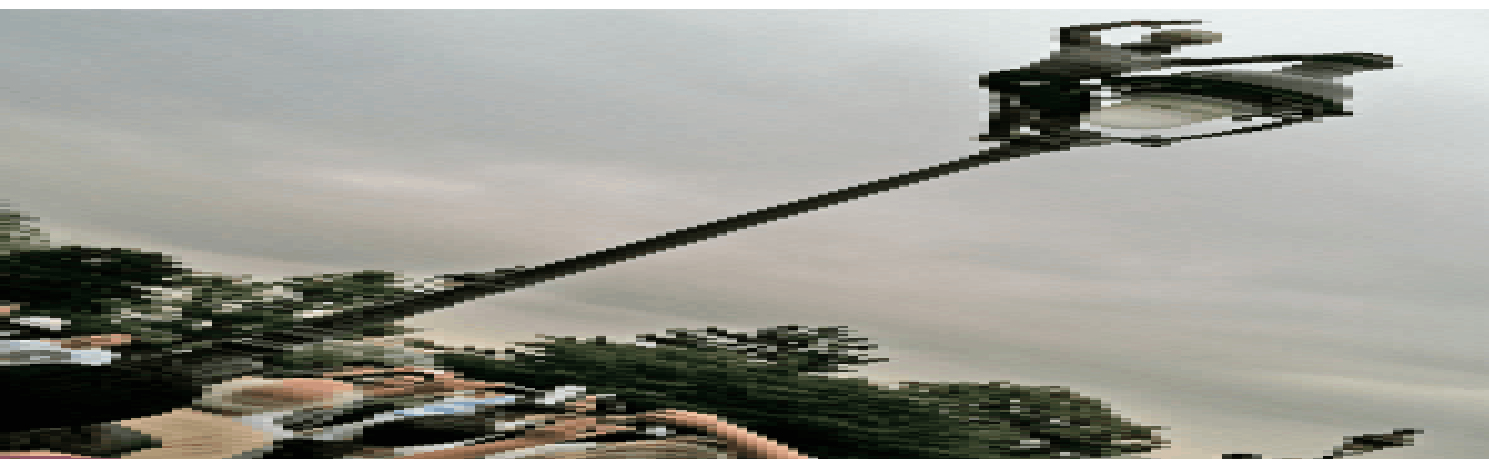
fascinating paper by Gunnar Breivik that explores the relationship between extreme sports and Heidegger's concepts of *anxiety*. Dangerous pastimes that take you to a height require resolute trust in equipment: ropes, crampons, harnesses and parachutes.

Heidegger talks about the breakdown of equipment in the workshop. Breakdown brings to light, or reveals, the nature of the environment we are in, at a particular moment. It even makes the moment. Heidegger refers to equipment in the carpenter's workshop (hammers, screwdrivers and saws), the failure of which is less than life threatening.

The possibility of fatal failure of equipment in extreme sports adds to the novice's anxiety. In fact Breivik makes much of the *first time* element of extreme sports. There's a lot here about anxiety as a primordial condition, exposed by confronting the possibility of your own death due to equipment failure, amplified further by the inevitable "groundlessness" of being up in the air and helplessly dependent on kit, maintenance routines, instructors and team mates.

Extreme sports participate in the logic of [exaggeration](#). What appeals to me about extreme encounters is that they bring new aspects of our world into sharp relief, often just for a moment.

Unusual, disruptive encounters can be experienced through gentler sports, art, a stunning piece of music, surveying a flock of gulls off the coast of Scotland, a flotilla of boats on the Thames, being somewhere that you've seen and heard about, and now you are [actually there](#) – sometimes just ordinary moments revealed in a new light; the everyday seen from above.





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Also see posts on [obliquity](#), [Heidegger and equipment](#), [play](#), [the uncanny](#) and [exaggeration](#).

Some *vertical* films: [Up](#), [The Eiger Sanction](#), [Around the World in Eighty Days](#), [Cargo](#), [Vertigo](#), [Mary Poppins](#) â?!



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Date Created

June 9, 2012

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