



Patron: Jim Broadbent

Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday September 27th, 2019

Free Solo (12a)

Dir: Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, Jimmy Chin

Starring: Alex Honnold

Sponsor: Bar Unico

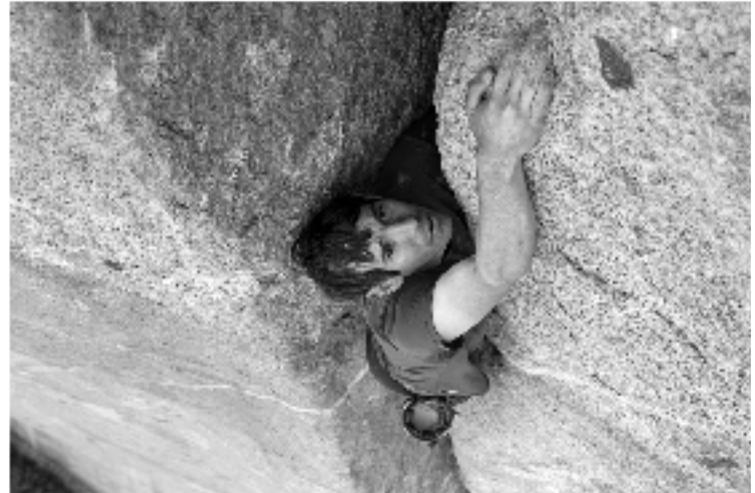
This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

Synopsis: A documentary following Alex Honnold's attempt to make the first 'free solo' ascent of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, California. He prepares intensely for the climb, on El Capitan and at other locations, suffers injury setbacks and struggles to reconcile the danger of the undertaking with the worries of those close to him. An initial attempt in 2016 is aborted at the early stages, as Honnold feels uncomfortable with the added burden of being filmed. He returns in 2017 and complete the climb.

Free Solo is the first film from co-directors Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin since 2015's *Meru* established the married couple at the forefront of mountain documentary making. This time they are working with Alex Honnold, whose daring ascents have made him the closest thing the modern climbing community has to a household name. Honnold has primarily built his formidable reputation free soloing (meaning climbing without safety ropes or partners) in Yosemite National Park, California. The new film covers his obsessive attempt to achieve the first free solo climb of the sheer rock face of El Capitan, the 900m granite monolith that is one of the crowning glories of Yosemite, at the same time documenting the inherent risk and its effect on those close to him.

That peril is well established in the film's opening section, as El Capitan incredible geological form, countless millennia in the making, reduces to insignificance the physical and temporal scales by which humans exist. Honnold's aim of facing the vertigo-inducing rock face with no more than a chalk bag seems epic but foolhardy; akin to a hero from Greek mythology challenging the gods. The very real prospect that he could die in the attempt casts an intermittent shadow over the nine-month period documented in *Free Solo*. The climber himself has long accepted significant risks and a high attrition rate among his peers as the price that must be paid to "feel perfect just for a moment". Honnold's partner Sanni McCandless understandably implores him to "maximize his lifespan"; when friend and fellow climber Ueli Steck perishes in the Himalayas, Honnold shocks McCandless by opining that Steck's widow would have expected such an outcome.

Clearly for Honnold the real challenge is navigating human relationships, and this provides some moments of welcome levity away from the rock face. Giving a talk at a school, Honnold compares himself financially to "a moderately successful dentist"; buying a house in Las Vegas after more than a decade living in a campervan leads to a fraught shopping trip with McCandless to buy a fridge. Unfortunately, a semi staged reality TV aesthetic creeps into the parts of the film dealing with the couple's relationship with



their goodbyes on the eve of the big climb jarring with the more observational approach elsewhere.

Back in Yosemite, the directors brilliantly illustrate the trials posed by El Capitan by breaking down the most dangerous and challenging sections in microscopic detail and emphasizing the very different techniques and strength necessary at each point. An extreme close-up of a tiny groove in the granite, which will serve as a tenuous foothold for Honnold's entire weight some hundreds of metres from the ground, brings home the slender margins involved, as does the demonstration of a route choice between a two-handed powered leap straight up the face or a karate-kick pivot between two walls. The filmmakers miss a trick, though, by failing to put into context the fact that Honnold is hoping to achieve in around 4 hours what usually takes even a highly accomplished climber several days carrying safety ropes, sustenance and equipment to sleep suspended from the rock face at night.

Having drawn us adroitly into this world, in its final 20 minutes the film takes us on a journey into the sublime as Honnold scales El Capitan, accompanied by Marco Beltrami's well-judged score. Meticulous preparation involving a team of unobtrusive, camera wielding climbers and artfully placed remote units, pays dividends, with the dynamic camera work from earlier in the film giving way to an elegant surveillance style superbly edited to chart Honnold's progress in relation to the parts of the climb we have come to know. The climbers' beautiful mastery, movement and facial expressions offer a rare glimpse into a state of grace and arouse empathy for his life choices. Soon after the climb, Honnold is already wondering what comes next. It will be equally fascinating to see how Vasarhelyi and Chin answer the same question.

Credits

Directors	Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, Jimmy Chin
Editor	Bob Eisenhardt
Director of Photography	Jimmy Chin, Clair Popkin, Mikey Schaefer
Music	Marco Beltrami
Producers	Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi, Jimmy Chin, Evan Hayes, Sharron Dill

USA 2018. 100 mins

Another view

Alex Honnold is caught between a rock and a hard-on. He's preparing to climb an egregious, 900-metre granite wall in Yosemite National Park, but his spoil-sport girlfriend, Sanni McCandless, won't stop being emotionally invested in his health, safety and wellbeing. Or so goes the remit of *Free Solo*, a dizzying documentary about Honnold's quest to become the first person to ever climb El Capitan sans safety gear. It's a story of physical strength, emotional vulnerability (or a lack thereof) and the irrational exploits of humans hell-bent on conquering the existential futility of being.

When *Free Solo* starts, van life has been working out fine for Honnold, a thirtysomething world traveller who looks like a ripped Nathan Fielder, and lives off canned chilli and chalk dust. Early on, filmmakers Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin posit that such an adventurous life is antithetical to having a girlfriend, never mind their subject's rusty social skills or unwavering self-absorption (synonymous here with Olympic-level determination).

As the film unfolds, Honnold's two competing quests – achieving exceptional athleticism and bare-minimum boyfriend points – seem to be mutually exclusive for the protagonist, the filmmakers and their collective friends. They're all too ready to blame McCandless for their hero's recent spate of injuries, as he trains for an act that has, in fact, killed many of their kindred climbers. *Free Solo* has no shortage of vertiginous scares, as Honnold and his underactive amygdala scale rock faces in North America and Morocco. Naturally, the cinematography is breathtaking, with due credit to the film's eight rock climbing camera operators.

Recording also creates an intriguing conflict: could the crew's presence be the true catalyst for Honnold's angst? What's the point of filming this feat if, becoming cognisant of a camera, our subject loses his foothold? At the pinnacle of narrative tension, with Honnold halfway up El Capitan, a drone-mounted camera leaves the man behind, and rises up to reveal the environmental splendour and terror that envelop him. As the dire possibilities of one misplaced finger sink in, Honnold's lone red t-shirt disappears from view, a blip in the history of civilisation. Yet still he clings.

Critical and audience responses to *Free Solo* have referred to Honnold's desire as 'universal' and his deed exemplary of the 'human spirit'. This homogenises the manifold passions and objectives of humankind, and presumes every person walking Earth wants to assert power and position over the landscape. Traditionally, this impulse has been exercised primarily by privileged white men (El Capitan itself was dubbed such by Californian militia fighting Native Americans during the Gold Rush). Honnold's story is no exception.

His performance of masculinity joins a time-honoured canon in which men stake their claim on similar territory. So what does it mean to root for a guy who can stare death in the eye, but can't hold a tape measure to help his girlfriend furbish their first house together? Who lets his filmmaker buddies position his partner as the Yoko Ono of rock climbing? *Free Solo* isn't a story about bravery, but fear, and not in the way it believes.

Aimee Knight: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday October 11th, 7.30pm *Burning* (S. Korea 2018. Cert 15)

When aspiring writer Jong-su meets Hae-mi in Seoul, there's a connection between them; they used to live in the same neighbourhood. Their friendship develops and when Hae-mi asks him to look after her house while she's away for some time, he happily agrees. On her return, she's accompanied by Ben, a handsome, enigmatic, wealthy young man. They are a couple, to Jong's disappointment. But as he gets to know Ben, Jong begins to suspect he's not what he seems; and when Hae-mi disappears, Jong becomes embroiled in a strange adventure.

Based on a short story by Murakami Haruki, and winner of multiple international awards (including the official competition at Cannes, 2018) *Burning* is an intriguing, mysterious, slow-burn drama (pun intended) that builds to a dramatic climax,

Committee News

The Society's Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday October 18th, at The Venue, after the screening of *The Guilty*. Papers will be emailed to members, who are welcome to attend, in the week beforehand.

This is the membership's chance to hear about the Society's development, ask questions and help formulate policy. We hope you will join us.