

**Dangerous Currents:
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Survive What? Bear Grylls, Leadership, and the NHS

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'The NHS must change if it is to survive',¹ says its Chief Executive Sir David Nicholson, while other commentators either doubt whether it can survive or ponder what would enable it to survive.² This seems a curious state of affairs, given that what is at stake is the thriving of every UK citizen, not just their continued life in emergency situations – after a car crash, for example – but their ability to exist in a pain-free, healthy, optimal way. It is even more curious since it is not accompanied by similar concerns about whether the Armed Services can survive, or education can survive, or the legal system can survive, or policing can survive, or the judiciary.

In this paper, therefore, I should like to think about what the term 'survive' means, in contemporary culture, the positioning it implies, and the ideologies that underpin it. In particular, I should like to critique the idea of survival as it appears in two television shows, hosted by Bear Grylls, *Mission – Survive* and *The Island*. As well, I should like to try to identify a counter-discourse of 'inhabiting' that might provide an antidote to survival.

The first thing that strikes anyone who has even a limited experience of living in 'wilderness' environments, and a novice's expertise in the skills involved in doing that safely and successfully, is the impracticality of Bear Grylls's programmes, as three simple examples show. In the middle of a rainforest, fresh water is abundant, as it was in the episode of *Mission - Survive* where Grylls insisted that his companions drink their urine. Instantly, the programme is located as either a practical joke – literally taking the piss out of the participants– or as a particular kind of fantasy. Similarly, the behaviour of the supposedly wild pigs, killed by participants of *The Island*, was so obviously not that of wild animals, that the tabloid press almost instantly reported that they were tame animals, taken there to be butchered for entertainment.³ Finally, the premise of both programmes, that it tests whether, in the event of someone being the only survivor of a plane crash in a remote area, they would be able to survive, is obvious nonsense. First, the chances of walking away uninjured from a plane crash are infinitesimal, and second, sophisticated monitoring systems mean that a flight going off the radar is so exceptional that it launches an international effort to locate it.

Of course, Grylls's own professional experience in the Special Air Service remains wholly relevant: survivalism was developed for military personnel evading capture behind enemy lines. That is not a value-neutral context, however: in 1980, when the televised siege of the Iranian embassy put the SAS in the public eye, John Le Carré commented on how its 'highly trained volunteers addicted to danger' were trained by being 'tortured, immersed in ditches filled with sheep's entrails, hooded, strapped to boards, trained to endure, to kill, to foreshorten their humanitarian responses.' As Le

Carré pointed out, this indicates a vast gap between the SAS and ordinary human values and reactions: it is not ‘the courage of the untrained passer-by who ‘has a go’ at a thug’ but ‘the courage of the tough guy put to social use.’ Accepting that ‘counter-terror vanquished terror’ and that ‘we should indeed be thankful that the extreme recourse succeeded’, Le Carré raises the moral, political, and social concern that ‘we should be scared stiff by the sight of shock-troops storming into London’s streets, and a little ashamed of having them billed as our national – racial? – champions.’⁴

In military contexts, the idea of survival is purposeful, if problematic in its social effect dehumanising people to become means to its ends. In civilian contexts, however, it seems gratuitous, perhaps used as a legitimisation of deliberate violence, like Le Carré’s antisocial thug, who might justify his predation on others by his own need to survive. Military personnel may find themselves in a world that is literally wholly opposed to them and that seeks to annihilate them – that is the nature of war – but in civilian settings, apart from the victims of eugenic projects, that is not the case. Natural disasters call forth international aid, humanitarian projects seeks to remedy the situations brought about by extreme poverty, and in the UK, the welfare state, and especially the NHS, seeks to ensure all of its citizens thrive, not survive.

Survival television, and Bear Grylls’s work in that genre, therefore, belongs to the same category of fantasy as the police procedural, ‘ambient television’, as one critic puts it, in which ‘we, the viewers, sink gleefully into our sofas ready to drink it in like cocoa. It’s a parlour game, a ritual. Our cosy lives are thankfully not this unremittingly tragic and grim, but it’s strangely cathartic to pretend that they are.’⁵ Fantasy is even more marked in Grylls’s recent novel, *Ghost Flight*, which does not pretend to even procedural realism: his hero is grossly dehydrated and suffering malnutrition – ‘his stomach had shrunk to the size of a walnut’ – after five weeks of incarceration, but he recovers by ‘forcing gulp after gulp’ of water down his throat, so that he can take part in a protracted and violent fight a few hours later; his brutal daily beatings have given him ‘a couple of broken fingers, ditto toes’ but these, strapped up, do not prevent him from a long distance motorbike ride, from the south of England to Scotland and back, on a motorbike that wasn’t in existence when his hero was supposed to have bought it, and so on.⁶ Billed as a combination of *The Bourne Identity* and *Indiana Jones*, the novel underlines Grylls’s commitment to the fantasy genre.

Grylls’s survival television programmes are not quasi-documentary, therefore, but are elimination game shows, using a reality television format, a kind of *Big Brother* meets *Family Fortunes*, not unlike *The Apprentice*, except that the contestants on Bear Grylls’s programmes do not claim to have the required skills, whereas those on Alan Sugar’s do. The comparison is an apposite one: both Sugar and Grylls present their artificial environments as ruthless and violent, in which contestants must be even more ruthless and violent in order to survive, while at the same presenting a façade of friendliness and co-operation, as part of their ruthless strategy to dominate the group – ‘leadership’, as they term it. And indeed, in the everyday world, as le Carré pointed out twentyfive years ago, the SAS siege of the Iranian embassy was presented as ‘Mrs Thatcher’s Small Business Made Perfect, the synthesisation of private industry to the national need.’⁷ It is as though both Sugar’s and Grylls’s fantasy worlds intended to lead viewers not into a parlour game but into a set of moral, political, and social ideologies, which are presented as implacably true, rather than the contrived nonsense they really are.

One lens through which these fantasy-survivalist ideologies can be viewed is Robinsonianism. Based on Robinson Crusoe as the ideal of self-sufficiency, Robinsonianism posits a political and economic Utopia in which man, independent and free of all social constraints, demonstrates his enterprise, so that 'through ceaseless activity he ensured that he controlled nature rather than nature controlling him.'⁸ So, for Robinsonians, Alan Sugar's bold entrepreneur and Bear Grylls's ultimate survivor come together in one vision, of the lone *ubermensch*, succeeding outside social norms, and vanquishing a hostile world.

Robinsonianism is an essentially male fantasy: for example, the female equivalent to Robinson Crusoe, Unca Eliza Winkfield, in *The Female American*,⁹ published fifty years later than Defoe's novel, finds a manuscript written by a man which teaches her how to survive, while few people have heard of Ada Blackjack,¹⁰ an Iñupiat Inuit woman who really survived alone for two years on Wrangel Island, in northern Siberia. Nor, of course, does it take account of the larger communities that enable a Robinsonian to survive, both those that produced material culture - Crusoe salvages tools, paper, books, guns, clothes, bedding - and those that educated him in his skills and abilities to survive. These are presented as givens, a kind of cultural fruit that grows freely, like the flora and fauna on Crusoe's island, waiting only to be dominated and controlled by the fiercely superior man.

Related to the Robinsonian lens is that of 'apocalyptic nostalgia'.¹¹ As Briohny Doyle points out, the elimination game-shows that comprise survival television, like films such as *Deliverance* and *First Blood*, provide a 'narrative of catastrophic challenge'. The purpose of their discourse of 'crisis and survival' is to evoke 'an unproblematic, stable, universal masculinity', a deeply conservative, nostalgic evocation of 'white, male protagonists whose survivalist challenge is also a challenge to display 'traditional' masculine characteristics such as stoicism, physical strength, Christian morality and skills associated with outdoor living'.¹² This process of masculinisation operates irrespective of whether the subjects are male or female, since it is a performance that elides all other values apart from the nostalgic ones that it foregrounds.¹³ Again, it is a fundamentally oppositional ideology, in which 'the man who seeks to conquer is an apocalypse-ready survivor prepared to exist outside the false comforts of cities and civilisations', while at the same time the natural world is 'depicted as wild, untameable, a place only the strongest men can survive and the ultimate test for masculinity'.¹⁴ The natural world is also, very necessarily, a kind of Terra Nullius, no-man's land, since in Grylls's game-shows, the people to whom the location is home, rather than a 'wilderness', are non-existent. Clearly, if women, children, and the elderly were shown not only able to live in, but easily to thrive in these 'untameable' locations, the masculinist fantasy would be exploded. It is true that Grylls's game-shows use real people and real places - they are not literal utopias - but their editing and presentation of those locations defines them as Foucauldian heterotopias, mingling utopian desire with cultural ideation to create 'fundamentally unreal places' in which 'all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.¹⁵ A heterotopia is 'a kind of effectively enacted utopia',¹⁶ gathering together the people and concerns of a culture, with a symbolic situating that both asserts and denies their physical location, operating, then, as a kind of cathexis of a culture's desire, revealing identity and desire as idealised, illusory, and alien. Rather than pure fantasy, they are partially-enacted fantasy.

Both Robinsonianism and heterotopic apocalyptic desire suggest a third lens, that of Randianism – the political and economic polemic produced by Ayn Rand, and popularised in her novels *The Fountainhead*¹⁷ and *Atlas Shrugged*.¹⁸ Both are melodramatic fantasies. The hero of *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark, presents the view that social progress depends on individual creativity and those few creative individuals are oppressed by the majority who are in effect parasites feeding off genius and destroying it in the process. Society should recognise the superiority of the few, whose work to conquer nature should not be hindered in any way, and society should reduce the influence of ‘parasites’. Taxation is theft; selflessness is weakness; and altruism is slavery to the collective, which should be schooled by the removal of all welfare benefits. *Atlas Shrugged* extends these ideas with a scenario in which the USA’s most creative (and thus wealthiest) people refuse to pay taxes or to allow government to use their inventions, business leadership, art and scientific research, and instead form a millennial, utopian community of their own while the rest of the USA crumbles and its inferior people die like the parasites they are. Extending these conceits into the political and economic polemic of Objectivism, Rand posited that rationality requires independence and individuality, and thus an ethic of selfishness, demanding a free and unregulated market in which to thrive. While her work, especially *Atlas Shrugged*, was strongly criticised as ideologically fascist, Randian Objectivism was highly influential on USA financial and economic policy, as Darryl Cunningham’s graphic narrative, *Supercrash: How to Hijack the Global Economy* entertainingly points out.¹⁹

Here, then, the protagonists of Robinsonian utopias and Grylls’s game-show heterotopias conjoin as Randian superior survivors, whose ‘concern is the conquest of nature’,²⁰ and who, in political, economic, and social terms must not ‘be curbed, sacrificed or subordinated to any consideration whatsoever. It demands total independence in function and in motive. To a creator, all relations with men are secondary’. Small wonder, then, that the discourse of survival, applied to the NHS, is deeply disturbing. Only the strong survive, yet by definition, every user of the NHS is weakened by illness, age, or accident. As a practical example of this survival discourse in action, we need look no further than Mid Staffs, where the business leadership operated on precisely these terms of survival, by meeting cost targets set by ‘superior men’ - government - at the expense of Randian parasites – its patients.

The alternative to the survivalist’s conquest of nature is the cohabitation with the natural world that defines Traditional Indigenous Knowledge [TIK]. Interestingly, this is represented by a documentary television discourse in the UK, in contrast to the game-show one. The practice of ‘bushcraft’, a term coined by the discipline’s founder, Ray Mears, is concerned with exploring the skills, knowledge, and experience required to form an everyday working relationship with the natural world, in order to live within it and travel through it. Both bushcraft and survival game-shows draw on a similar skill-set but their ethical, political, and practical purposes are quite different. Specifically, bushcraft operates in the real-life world, rather than a fantasy one, and it explores ways of developing relationality with natural environments, rather than subordinating them. Mears’s distinctive contributions are to education, not sensationalism, and while survival television depends on the idea of ‘wilderness’, bushcraft depends on the idea of landscape and the resources within it. In this sense, bushcraft relates to TIK, local knowledge held by indigenous people, and to Traditional Ecological Knowledge [TEK], ‘a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with

*one another and with their environment.*²¹ Thus, 'it is a way of knowing; it is dynamic, building on experience and adapting to changes. It is an attribute of societies with historical continuity in resource use on a particular land'.²²

Turning back to the NHS, then, it is perhaps notable that the sensationalist discourse of survival belongs to politicians, rather than NHS clinicians or managers. The NHS is presented as a wilderness to be subdued, before it devours the national economy, not as a landscape to be inhabited as a necessary part of everyday life. The political narrative of survival seems to fantasise a group of people who are permanently healthy, being fed upon by a parasitical body of the sick and elderly, as though good or ill health were a matter of personal choice, and contrasting the laziness of the sick with the inherent steely will of superior man. We see this in the illness narrative surrounding Grylls himself: 'Famously, he dropped out of the SAS in 1996 after breaking his back and, instead of spending the rest of his days in a bath chair, two years later became among the youngest people ever to climb Everest.'²³ The Victorian allusion to 'a bath chair' positions the medical attention he received as out-of-date, at the same time as it disauthenticates clinicians' reasonable prognosis and contrasts it with Grylls's own, almost miraculous, apparent self-cure. And indeed, Rand believed that health, welfare, and social services were redundant, and that government should provide only the military, police, and judicial system for its citizens.

The contemporary discourse of survival is a brutal, partial, elitist, inhuman, fantasy in which the weak are deliberately swept away for the financial and material benefit of the strong. Perhaps this is why it is only the NHS that is in a crisis-survival situation, and not the police, military, judiciary, transport, education, utilities, or indeed any of the real 'big spend' items in the national economy. Survivalism is ideologically eugenic, and eugenics always focuses on the most vulnerable: those who most need compassion are met, instead, by conquest.

It does not seem likely that Grylls is aware of the discursive position that his work occupies – that would be ironic, since it is exactly this brutal, ultra-conservative ideology that his much loved grandfather spent the second world war fighting against, and which Grylls's fictional hero also fights. Nor do I mean to suggest that other commentators are aware of the implications of them locating the NHS in a survival narrative. My point today is precisely that: discourse operates beneath the surface, and it is the role of practice-based Medical Humanities to reveal and critique it, thereby bringing to consciousness the moral unconscious of its leaders, enabling them to provide leadership that balances ethical imperatives with bottom-lines, and that replaces the discursive imperative of 'survive' with the real-life, everyday knowledge of our need to thrive.

- ¹ NHS England, 'Change is the key to NHS survival', 3 March 2014 [<https://www.england.nhs.uk/2014/03/03/nhs-survival/> accessed 19 June 2015].
- ² For example, Simon Jenkins, 'The NHS can't survive without payment for frontline treatments', *Guardian*, 6 January 2015 [<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/06/nhs-cant-survive-without-payment-frontline-treatments> accessed 19 June 2015]; Polly Toynbee, 'The NHS is on the brink: can it survive until May 2015?', *Guardian*, 9 May 2014 [<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/09/nhs-on-brink-survive-may-2015-tories-praying> accessed 19 June 2015].
- ³ Ben Ellery, 'Fury as tame pigs killed on Bear Grylls' isle', *The Mail on Sunday*, 10 May 2015 [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3075196/Fury-tame-pigs-killed-Bear-Grylls-isle-TV-adventurer-centre-row-animal-cruelty.html> accessed 16 June 2015].
- ⁴ John le Carré, 'Introduction', in *Siege: Six Days at the Iranian Embassy*, edited by Donald Treford (London: Macmillan, 1980) pp. 1-7, p. 7.
- ⁵ David Stubbs, 'Watching the Detectives', *Guardian The Guide*, Saturday 13 June 2015, pp. 14-16, p. 15.
- ⁶ Bear Grylls, *Ghost Flight* (Orion Ebook, 2015), locations 257, 270, 697.
- ⁷ le Carré, p. 5.
- ⁸ Erik Ringmar, *Why Europe Was First: Social Change and Economic Growth in Europe and East Asia, 1500-2050* (London: Anthem Press, 207), p. 118.
- ⁹ Unca Eliza Winkfield [pseudonym] *The Female American, or the adventures of U E Winkfield, compiled by herself* (London: F. Noble, 1767).
- ¹⁰ Jennifer Niven, *Ada Blackjack: A true story of survival in the Arctic* (New York: Hyperion, 2003).
- ¹¹ Briohny Doyle, 'The Apocalypse is Masculine – Masculinities in Crisis in Survivalist Films', *National Academy of Screen and Sound Interactive Media E-Journal*, Issue 8 (2012) [http://sphinx.murdoch.edu.au/~20100408/nass_uat/issue8/pdf/IM8-masculine-feminine-article-02-doyle.pdf accessed 17 June 2015]. I am indebted to Bushcraft expert and PhD student Lisa Fenton, from the Woodsmoke organisation, for drawing my attention to these ideas and this paper. See <http://www.woodsmoke.uk.com/> for examples of her work.
- ¹² Doyle, p. 3.
- ¹³ For example, see Megan Hine, 'A call to adventure' *Ripcord Adventure Journal* [<http://www.ripcordadventurejournal.com/read-raj/volume-1/volume-1-issue-3/a-call-to-adventure-megan-hine.html>], the female 'survival expert' for *The Island*, whose personal narrative is hypermasculinity – 'I am proud to stand among the ranks of mountain and wilderness professionals, the silent corps with the thousand mile gaze . . . We follow in the wake of the great explorers, the trail blazers, the likes of Shackleton, Hillary, Amundsen . . . Those incredible humans who lit the flame of exploration . . . In all of us there glows a residual ember of this time of exploration, a dull need inside to push boundaries and discover new horizons, to fight for survival' – combined with patronization – 'I am privileged now to be able to share this with others, to take them by the hand and lead them over the threshold and into the wild. To help them to face their own challenges and to overcome hurdles they never thought possible'
- ¹⁴ Doyle, p. 8.
- ¹⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', ('Des Espace Autres') trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture/ Mouvement/ Continuité*, October 1984 (March 1967), Online <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> [accessed 31 March 2015].
- ¹⁶ Op. cit.
- ¹⁷ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* [1943] (New York: Scribner, 1983).
- ¹⁸ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957).
- ¹⁹ Darryl Cunningham, *Supercrash: How to Hijack the Global Economy* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2014).
- ²⁰ *The Fountainhead*, p. 712.
- ²¹ Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 7.
- ²² Op. cit.

²³ Lucy Kellaway, 'The Lucy Kellaway Interview: Bear Grylls', *Financial Times*, 20 March 2015 [<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/92c8d38e-cdc0-11e4-8760-00144feab7de.html> accessed 19 June 2015].