

WE ARE A CAMERA

Experience and memory in the age of GoPro.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN



The GoPro short video is a post-literate diary, a stop on the way to a future in which everything will be filmed from every point of view. The pervasiveness of cameras, seemingly playful and benign, may be anything but.

COURTESY GOPRO

Late one fall afternoon two years ago, Aaron Chase, a professional mountain biker, was riding his bike in the Smoky Mountains, near Sun Valley, Idaho. He'd powered up to a high-altitude ridge and was gazing, less than eagerly, at the trail down toward the backcountry yurt where he and two fellow pro riders were camped for the week. He wasn't feeling well. He was tired, hungry, dehydrated, and a little woozy. In the argot, he was bonking.

He and the others, along with a professional photographer, had spent two days filming video footage of themselves hurtling down steep technical trails and executing tricks off natural features. They had brought along more than a dozen GoPros, the ubiquitous small digital point-of-view cameras.

Chase, who is sponsored by GoPro and is exceptionally adept at using GoPro cameras to make videos, likes to use a camera mount called the 360 Narwhal, after the species of whale with a tusk protruding from its jaw. The mount consists of a lightweight carbon rod affixed

to the top of his helmet, like a helicopter rotor, to which he attaches a pair of GoPros, one at each end, a couple of feet from the center, in the manner of two buckets hanging from a carrying pole. The rod can rotate around its center, its movements determined by the cameras' weight and centrifugal momentum. Typically, Chase sets one camera a little farther out from his head than the other and, with subtle tilts of his head, exploits the asymmetry to manipulate the cameras' positions and movements as he rides. He is star athlete, director, and D.P. He gives as much thought to getting the shot as he does to nailing the trick.

For two days in the Idaho mountains, Chase's cameras had been rolling virtually non-stop. Now, with his companions lagging behind, he started down the trail, which descended steeply into an alpine meadow. As he accelerated, he noticed, to his left, an elk galloping toward him from the ridge. He glanced at the trail, looked again to his left, and saw a herd, maybe thirty elk, running at full tilt alongside his bike, like a pod of dolphins chasing a boat. After a moment, they rumbled past him and crossed the trail, neither he nor the elk slowing, dust kicking up and glowing in the early-evening sun, amid a thundering of hooves. It was a magical sight. The light was perfect. And, as usual, Chase was wearing two GoPros. Here was his money shot—the stuff of TV ads and real bucks.

Trouble was, neither camera was rolling. What with his headache and the ample footage of the past days, he'd thought to hell with it, and had neglected, just this once, to turn his GoPros on. Now there was no point in riding with the elk. He slowed up and let them pass. "Idiot," he said to himself. "There goes my commercial."

Once the herd was gone, it was as though it'd never been there at all—Sasquatch, E.T., yeti. Pics or it didn't happen. Still, one doesn't often find oneself swept up in a stampede of wild animals. Might as

well hope to wingsuit through a triple rainbow. So you'd think that, cameras or not, he'd remember the moment with some fondness. But no. "It was hell," Chase says now.

When the agony of missing the shot trumps the joy of the experience worth shooting, the adventure athlete (climber, surfer, extreme skier) reveals himself to be something else: a filmmaker, a brand, a vessel for the creation of content. He used to just do the thing—plan the killer trip or trick and then complete it, with panache. Maybe a photographer or film crew tagged along, and afterward there'd be a slide show at community centers and high-school gyms, or an article in a magazine. Now the purpose of the trip or trick is the record of it. Life is footage.

Chase's elk came to mind on the morning, in late June, of GoPro's initial public offering. When GoPro goes public, there is no chance of missing the shot. Before the opening bell, legions of GoPro executives, employees, family, and friends gathered on the ground floor of the NASDAQ building, in what is really just a TV studio, facing out onto Times Square. There's no trading floor at NASDAQ, so bell ringings are Potemkin affairs—in this case, not only for the usual phalanx of TV cameras but also for the fifty-odd GoPros the team had brought along, so everyone could chronicle the occasion from a variety of unconventional vantages.

The camera is a relatively simple device. High-tech guts in low-tech disguise—it's "cute and fancy," as the late Sony chairman Akio Morita is supposed to have said of the Walkman. A GoPro Hero 3+, the latest iteration (the tech rumor mill predicts that the Hero 4 will debut next month), costs between three hundred and four hundred dollars. Once removed from its waterproof case—to the GoPro what armor was to the knight—it is small and spare. People say "matchbox-size" but it's more like two matchboxes. It has just three buttons and yet, somehow, dozens of settings.

The GoPro is defined as much by its limitations as by its advantages. It has no display, so you can't see what's in the frame. In a way, this doesn't matter, because the wide-angle lens takes in so broad a field (everything in focus, everything lit) that you need only point it in a general direction and you can expect to capture something good.

Both the indicator light and the control display are on the front of the camera, so this is where its operator must go to operate it, or to make sure that it is in fact operating. In unedited GoPro shots, the cameraman often appears in closeup in the frame, amid the muffled clatter of finger (or glove) brushing microphone; this routine parenthesis is the GoPro version of a director's slate. (You could cut an hour-long edit of these accidental selfies—a montage of scraped knuckles, double chins, and bloodshot eyes—and call it "Action!") The microphone picks up sound that is very close but misses sound farther away. GoPro shots are often characterized by one-sided conversation, the rattle of straps, or the beatbox fusillade of water and wind. This is one reason a polished GoPro edit is usually set to music. Still, the clarity of the picture, which renders trees, waves, seracs, clouds, and cliffs with a kind of lysergic radiance, flatters the natural world.

On the morning of the I.P.O., the company's founder, Nick Woodman, who devised a crude version of the camera twelve years ago to get photos of himself surfing, held GoPros, at different times, in his teeth, at arm's length, or on an array of mounts, filming himself and others, who in turn trained their cameras on him and on themselves. Woodman, in jeans and a dark-blue button-down shirt, tan and fit with white teeth and spiky dark hair, led them in impromptu banshee howls, the feral woo-hoos of joyriders everywhere, and chants of "Go Pro! Go Pro! Go Pro!" and with his non-GoPro hand flashed the surfer's hang-loose shaka sign. He pointed a GoPro at himself and howled, "This is really happening!" The camera affirmed it.

Becoming a multibillionaire may not be as rare an occurrence these days as riding a mountain bike through a herd of elk, but it is nonetheless a feat worthy of documentation. GoPro's offering price, of twenty-four dollars a share, valued the company at around three billion dollars. Woodman's father, Dean Woodman, a hale gent of eighty-five who had himself once been a very successful entrepreneur, as a founder of the now defunct San Francisco investment bank Robertson Stephens, and who early on had lent his son two hundred thousand dollars to finance GoPro, came up to him and said, "You look like a rock star."

"I play one on TV," the son said. He is known as the Mad Billionaire, for his hyperactive antics and taste for adventure sports. But when it came time for him to talk, just before the opening, he teared up, presumably at this culmination of so much hard work—years of risks rewarded, doubts dashed, overpromises met, and paternal expectations exceeded. He recovered himself for the cameras. "I'm fired up!" he called out to his employees. "You fired up?"

After the bell, while the GoPro employees milled around and posed for photos, Brad Schmidt, GoPro's creative director, working on a laptop with GoPro editing software, quickly cut the footage into a packet to present to the TV producers who'd be interviewing Woodman and his fellow-executives throughout the day. As Schmidt has said, you don't hunt shots; you "capture" them. (This approach requires lots of work in the cutting room, or what *Surfing* called "a time-warping pain in the edit-ass.") Schmidt scrolled through dozens of vantages, many of them imbued with a kinetic intensity you don't usually see on the set of a stock-market show. "The button shot is amazing," he said; it had captured Woodman reaching down toward the camera to press a lit panel that would initiate the day's trading—the NASDAQ equivalent, perhaps, of getting tubed at Pipeline.

As he worked, half a dozen guests held their GoPros up to the window to film the Jumbotrons in Times Square, which NASDAQ had leased for the occasion in order to display GoPro videos. Among the cavalcade of images was an underwater shot of Woodman's toddler son learning to swim: a private event now magnified into mythology in the hall of mirrors that is our world of cameras and screens.

Woodman had the good fortune to invent a product that was well suited to a world he had not yet imagined. The ripening of the technology in his camera, after a half decade of tinkering, coincided with the fruition of broadband and the emergence of YouTube, Facebook, and other social-media platforms for the wide distribution of video. GoPro rode the wave. What might have been just another camcorder became a leading connector between what goes on in the real world and what goes out in the virtual one—a perfect instrument for the look-at-me age. Its charm lies perhaps in its sublimated conveyance of self, its sneaky tolerable narcissism. GoPro footage is related to the selfie, in its “Here I am” (or “was”) ethos, and its wide view and variety of mounts often allow the filmmaker to include himself, or some part of himself, in the shot. But because it primarily points outward it's a record of what an experience looks like, rather than what the person who had the experience looked like when he stopped afterward and arranged his features into his pretested photo face. The result is not as much a selfie as a worldie. It's more like the story you'd tell about an adventure than the photo that would accompany it.

Though GoPro is known primarily for its connection to adventure sports, the camera is increasingly used in feature films and on TV, and by professionals of many stripes—musicians, surgeons, chefs. Many BMWs now come with an app to control a GoPro in the dash (in case you want to show the kids your commute). The company has been promoting its use in broadcasting traditional sports. An armada of GoPros greatly enhanced the coverage of last year's America's Cup,

in San Francisco Bay, but perhaps they'd shed less light on the mysteries of an N.F.L. line of scrimmage: one imagines indecipherable grunting and rustling, the filmic equivalent of a butt dial. The opposite of this, and the big thing these days, is the footage that comes from mounting GoPros on small quadcopter drones: sublime sweeping shots and heretofore unseen bird's-eye vantages, on the cheap.

As for its broadcast applications, we are still in a relatively primitive stage. A GoPro senior producer described to me the process he came up with last year to get P.O.V. footage of Shane Dorian surfing the giant waves at Mavericks, off the coast of Northern California, to use on a broadcast of a competition there. After Dorian had ridden a wave, a guy on a Jet Ski would zoom over, grab the camera, and then carry it in past the break to a paddleboarder, who'd maneuver through the swirling whitewash to the base of a cliff, over which a member of the broadcast team had lowered a basket. Up went the basket, and an assistant ran the camera over to the broadcast tent.

"Oh, come on—I just want to see if my friend is in there!"

In going public, GoPro has tried to position itself not just as a camera-maker but as a media company—a producer and distributor of branded content. In this conception, it is hawking not only cameras and accessories (the source, up to now, of pretty much all of GoPro's revenue) but videos, too (a source, up to now, of pretty much no revenue). In the past five years, videos posted by GoPro have attracted half a billion views. On the GoPro channel on YouTube, videos average about half a million viewers each. The company thinks it can capitalize on the fact that thousands of people every day post videos online and, without prompting, tag them as GoPro.



Most of them are not the ones that come from their sponsored athletes (or “brand ambassadors”), like Aaron Chase, who are expected to submit footage. They are crowdsourced—amateur-hour finds that turn pro. For the latter, GoPro pays very little—maybe some accessories or a camera, plus, say, a thousand dollars for the first million views. A cadre of editors at GoPro scours Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit and often reëdits the best and pushes them out on its own channels on YouTube, Pinterest, and other platforms. In the process, the company has nurtured a growing army of amateurs (eager providers of free content) and helped the GoPro name become shorthand not only for all P.O.V. cameras, including those made by other manufacturers, but for the genre of short video that has arguably become as much a feature of daily life as the three-minute pop song.

You can probably think of as many viral GoPro videos as you can recent hit singles. Have you seen the one that was shot from the beak of an airborne pelican? The one of the South African mountain biker being robbed by the gunman? The woman giving birth on the sidewalk? The fireman rescuing the kitten? The Lion Whisperer guy? “Toy Robot in Space”? The view from a car wheel or the inside of a fox’s mouth or a drone soaring through a Fourth of July fireworks display? Of course you have, and if you haven’t I’ll send you the link.

The genre is characterized by point of view, by brevity, and by incident. The ones that go viral contain something extraordinary, be it unimaginable risk, uncharted beauty, unlikely encounter, or unexpected twist. The categories bleed. A common critique has been that the presence of the camera prods people to take greater risks as they aspire to virality—Kodak courage, which might now be more properly called GoPro guts. It may not be fair to say that it’s the camera that causes people to attempt to brush the ground while flying past an outcrop in a wingsuit, but perhaps seeing it done on film inspires other people to try. Some have attributed this phenomenon

to “Jackass,” the MTV program on which a band of pranksters subjected their bodies to clever, horrific abasements, but, really, people have attempted dangerous stunts for attention and money since the invention of the camera. Before there was Johnny Knoxville there was Buster Keaton. GoPro has been sensitive to the contention that their cameras play any role in getting people to do stupid, risky, dangerous, or unlawful things. It offers, with some plausibility, a kind of guns-don’t-kill-people argument. Don’t blame the camera. A spokesman cited Icarus.

A popular subgenre is the blooper, the so-called GoPro Fail. Sometimes the intention to Be a Hero causes one instead to Be the Schlemiel. There may be violence, but insofar as it ends well, you might call it comic. My favorite GoPro Fail, which first made the rounds in February, 2011, and still circles the Internet in a kind of ongoing viral orbit, was of, and by, a skier named Stefan Ager. The video is a minute and a half long and is shot from Ager’s helmet mount. It begins with him and a friend atop a snow-clad peak in Austria, after a three-hour climb. The setting is a sheer ridge, with cliffs seemingly dropping off in all directions. After some giddy panorama shots, he holds his helmet out and turns the camera on himself, revealing a young shaggy dude. He dons the helmet and looks down to put on his skis, which he lays parallel in the snow, along the narrow ridge. He steps into his bindings, the skis drift backward a few inches, and—“Whoa!”—our man goes backward over the precipice. The camera tosses and clicks as Ager—“Aaaah!”—plummets more than a thousand vertical feet down a cliff, bouncing off rocks, before landing—“Oof!”—on the edge of a glacier. He moans a couple of times and then stands up (or so it looks from his shadow, which is topped by a silhouette of the GoPro). He looks around. Somehow, his survival makes the glacier all the more beautiful, even to the viewer. He glances back to where he came from, and then the video ends.

It's the mother of all pratfalls, and I've watched it more than a dozen times. It's had more than three million hits. Last month, when I tracked Ager down, via Facebook, I felt as though I'd found an e-mail address for, say, Lorde. He wrote back, "I am actually not interested in an interview regarding my fall. I am glad that nothing happened and I can keep skiing."

Every entrepreneurial success story hardens into legend, and the quickening often occurs around the time of the I.P.O. GoPro's is as follows: In 1999, during the dot-com boom, Woodman, a recent graduate of the University of California at San Diego and the son of a prominent Bay Area banker, started an online video-game company called Funbug. It failed two years later, amid the dot-com crash, and Woodman, embarrassed over having lost other people's money, decided to take six months off to surf and travel with his girlfriend. While in Indonesia, in 2002, he struck up a friendship with another surfer, named Brad Schmidt. They were both intrigued by the problem of how to get pictures of themselves riding waves. At this point, Woodman's innovation was a wrist wrap fashioned from the ankle end of his surfboard leash, to which, using rubber bands, he affixed a disposable Kodak camera in a waterproof case. He had a sense that the wristband could be marketable, but soon realized, after trying various cameras, that it would get complicated, with regard to licensing and legal permission. So he went to China to have a camera made to his specs.

By 2004, he had a prototype of the GoPro Hero, a clunky 35-mm. box that used film. In the next few years, with Schmidt testing it out on surfing trips and sending back astonishing images, Woodman made refinements, and started making money, too. He travelled around the country in a 1974 VW van he called Biscuit, to surf shops and trade shows (and did a couple of appearances on QVC); to raise extra funds he sold belts made of seashells he'd picked up in Bali. At surfing events, he handed out cameras to pros. One day, he attached a

GoPro to the cockpit of a racecar, and everyone at the track became fascinated by both the device and the result. A light bulb: this thing wasn't just for surfers.

Schmidt, fresh out of film school, became the head of GoPro's media division, which distributed as many videos, from an ever-widening circle of sources, as it could—in part, as Schmidt has said, to convince the world that these videos were real. By the end of the decade, the GoPro was commonplace in the world of action sports. Every week seemed to bring a revelatory new vantage on some established exploit or trick. And then people began coming up with new moves and feats, to suit the camera.

The producers at GoPro are often athletes themselves, maybe with some film or photography experience. Woodman has always encouraged his employees to hire their friends. Zak Shelhamer, a photographer and former professional snowboarder, joined the company to help edit and produce snow-sport videos and now runs the adventure-sports division. He told me that he'd recently been talking to a pair of young Frenchmen who were planning to row a boat from Monterey to Hawaii. They'd submitted a proposal for a contest the company ran called How Will You GoPro? They didn't win, but Shelhamer gave them some cameras anyway and promised to take an interest in what they might come back with. In discussing the risks, he mentioned a guy who had tried rowing from Australia to New Zealand. "How'd he do?" one of the Frenchmen asked him.

"He drowned," Shelhamer said.

"How'd they figure that out?"

"They found his camera."

After the I.P.O., GoPro's stock price almost doubled and began to develop the characteristics of a so-called battleground stock. On one side were the believers, who, implicitly or not, endorsed the company's branded content aspirations. (One Wall Street analyst last week called GoPro a "movement.") On the other side were the skeptics who suspected that the stock's rise had as much to do with a love for the product as for its real long-term prospects—cute and fancy winning out, for now, over hard and cold. They note that bigger companies are now making similar cameras (one can argue which are the best), and so they wonder how long GoPro can stay on top. The cautionary example, cited by doubters and by GoPro itself, is the Flip, the briefly ubiquitous digital camcorder, which got overtaken by smartphones and is now out of business.

The company wants to capitalize on the mass-market home-video urge, the camera's aptitude for capturing what GoPro's president, Tony Bates, calls "life's great moments," and yet retain its reputation as a kind of philosopher's stone, capable of transforming ordinary experience into magical footage. (Two tips: "Slow it down and you look like a pro." "The closer the better.") In some respects, the GoPro is like the Brownie and the Polaroid, devices that democratized photography and revolutionized the way we think about the past and even the way we fashion the present, with an eye to how it will look later, when we linger over photographs of it. But the analogy comes up short, because GoPro videos aspire to go viral. You're sharing the photos of your ski trip not just with your family and a few friends but, if you're any good, with thousands, if not millions, of people. The GoPro, by implication, asks its users to push a little harder, as both subjects and filmmakers. Be a Hero: The premise from the start has been that you, in every way an amateur, can go pro—on both sides of the lens. It's karaoke, but with the full Marshall stack.

The short video synonymous with GoPro is a kind of post-literate diary, a stop on the way to a future in which everything will be filmed from every point of view. Humans have always recorded their experiences, in an array of media and for a variety of reasons. Not until very recently, with the advent of digital photography and video, and unlimited storage and distribution capacity, has it been conceivable to film everything. As we now more than ever communicate through pictures, either still or moving, perhaps our lives come closer to Susan Sontag's imagined "anthology of images." An obvious example is the people who film concerts on their smartphones. Will they ever watch the video? And if they do will it measure up to the concert, which they half missed? Of course not. They film the concert to certify their attendance and convey their good fortune. The frame corroborates.

The computer scientist Gordon Bell, a former Digital Equipment Corporation engineer, an early developer of the Internet, and later a top researcher at Microsoft, spent several years as the main subject of a life-logging experiment called MyLifeBits, inspired by the work of the scientist Vannevar Bush, who, in 1945, wrote, "The camera hound of the future wears on his forehead a lump a little larger than a walnut." (To store all the images, and everything else, Bush envisioned a device called the "memex," short for memory extender.) Bell, in addition to digitizing every document, object, phone conversation, and transaction in his life, wore a Microsoft SenseCam around his neck. It snapped a photo every twenty seconds.

"What you're capturing is one thing," he told me. "The other is when are you going to use it." He'd recently gone to a conference on memory, sponsored by something called the Institute for the Future. Apparently, psychologists and neurologists have discovered that photos or video of an event are more effective than notes or conversation at helping people remember an experience.

Bell is amazed that a surfer in California cornered the market for what he calls go-everywhere cameras. “Where were the Japanese?” he said. “They totally ignored the fact that you could have a camera like this at this price point. But really it’s not the camera—it’s the Internet.”

At any rate, he predicts that eventually GoPros and their ilk, as well as contrivances like Google Glass, will be supplanted by truly wearable cameras, with virtually no volume (a card, or a chip, or, one imagines, an implant in the retina). “Is there a time in the future where people will record everything they see and hear?” Bell asked. “Yes. It’s at least a decade away.” The difficulty arises in the sorting—a pain in the edit-ass of big-data proportions. “It requires an enormous amount of software.”

“May I air-quote you?”

By now, so much video is being produced that it’s hard to imagine a fate for it other than obsolescence. Where does all this video go? If it’s in the cloud, will it all come falling back to earth, in an apocalypse of pets, babies, head-cam porn, flight lessons, golf swings, and unicycle tricks?



Earlier this summer, I attended the GoPro Mountain Games, in Vail, Colorado, a competition-cum-festival featuring mountain bikers, rock climbers, and other outdoor athletes. Teeming with GoPros, the village, ersatz Alpine to begin with, felt a little like the set of a ski-town “Brigadoon.” One afternoon, I went whitewater kayaking down Gore Creek with Eric and Dane Jackson, father-and-son professional freestyle kayakers and GoPro ambassadors. The paddling wasn’t hard, and yet the Jacksons, who routinely descend steep creeks and giant waterfalls, seemed intent on making my outing into an accomplishment worthy of recording and then foisting onto

the world. Now and then, Dane paddled over, spat on his fingers, and rubbed saliva on the lens of the GoPro on the bow of my boat. We drifted past a man who was operating a quadcopter drone with a GoPro attached. It swooped over us and then receded upriver. Above the takeout, in town, a little girl with a GoPro on her forehead passed over us on a zip line. On bridges and banks: GoPros everywhere. We were mayflies, flashing through the frames of strangers.

When we were done, Eric Jackson, using GoPro's editing program, made a thirty-second video of our trip and posted it on his Facebook page. He scrolled down, interested only in how much attention his posts were getting, not in what others had to say. "I don't read any of this," he said. "I don't read Facebook. I don't watch the other videos. I don't want to read everyone else's diaries. I write a diary." He posts a video almost every day, in part to promote himself and his business (he also manufactures kayaks), but also out of some compulsion to leave a record of his exploits—to draw on the walls of the cave.

Two years ago, my son, then ten, won a GoPro in a school raffle. On a ski vacation that spring, he affixed it to the top of his helmet with the standard mount—Tinkywinky, we called him, after the Teletubby with the triangle on its head—and let it roll most of the day, five to fifteen minutes at a stretch. What struck me, while watching some of the footage on a laptop later, was the idiosyncratic ordinariness of it. As he skied, he whistled to himself, made odd sounds, looked around at the mountains, shouted to his brother and his cousin, cried out at the slightest hint of air, and now and then bent forward and filmed upside down through his legs. Even though the camera was turned outward, filled mainly by the sight of the terrain sliding past, it provided, more than anything, a glimpse into the mind of a dreamy and quiet boy—who, to my eyes, during the day, had been just a nose, his features and expressions otherwise hidden by helmet, neck gaiter, and goggles. I didn't need a camera to show me what he looked like to the world, but was delighted to find

one that could show me what the world looked like to him. It captured him better than any camera pointed at him could. This was a proxy, of sorts.

This past spring, he again spent a few days skiing with the camera on his head—Tinkywinky at twelve. His best footage came from a powder morning, his first ever in the Rockies; the camera aimed just past the tips of his skis. Every civilian who skis powder with a GoPro on his head gets the same kind of shot, pole tips rhythmically appearing at the edges of the frame, ski tips porpoising in and out of the snow, the occasional whoop of joy. In my son's video, the whistling and whimsical attention of two years before had given way to a devoted concentration and perhaps an earnest attempt to record what he, in the manner of skiers everywhere, deemed a noteworthy experience. Later, he shot footage while following me through gaps in the trees. That night, I watched it—again in the manner of skiers everywhere—for glimpses of myself.

A month later, he had to make a presentation in class, and he decided to do his about the GoPro. Planning to demonstrate his handiwork, he edited the footage, but then, at the last moment, decided it was too commonplace. It wasn't awesome enough—or, anyway, he didn't want his classmates to think that he thought it was awesome. Instead, he featured, in his report, a famous video from the P.O.V. of a mountain biker named Kelly McGarry doing a backflip over a canyon gap in Virgin, Utah. My son had become a habitual consumer of GoPro videos. Even as a grommet, he had standards. He no longer thought of it as home video.

At many ski areas nowadays, you can rent a GoPro for the day. The slopes teem with Teletubbies. People have helmet mounts for P.O.V. cameras of every make, and even smartphones in waterproof shells. It's not just groms or pros. It's grampas and gapers, too ("gapers" being the shredder's term for hapless wannabes). A ski trip has

become a kind of life-logging vacation. People who'd never film a minute of their ordinary lives deem a day riding chairlifts and creeping along groomed trails to be worthy of wall-to-wall coverage. The sense among many serious skiers is that the cameras have contributed to heedless, or at least distracted, behavior in the backcountry. Any attention given to getting the shot, or posing for it, is attention diverted from the task of staying safe. Of course, there is no data to support this, and it could well be mere curmudgeonly grumbling. It's just that there are so many videos of bad stuff happening to backcountry skiers. GoPros have made it possible to see, really for the first time, the way the snowpack jigsaws around you (a skier's version of a land mine's click) when an avalanche kicks off or how it looks and sounds to be buried when the slide comes to a stop.

When it ends badly, the camera can be a kind of black box. A fantasy of the film-everything movement is an end to forensic uncertainty. Wearable P.O.V. cameras are also coming into vogue as a tool for soldiers and police. The premise is that reviewability makes for greater accountability—that seeing is knowing. After the Michael Brown shooting, in Ferguson, many commentators, accustomed already to the ubiquity of cameras, were dismayed that there was no footage of the incident. In this instance, we may wish we had some, but a world in which the police film every interaction with the public is not all sweetness and light. You may catch some bad cops, but you'd also hamstring the good ones. By enforcing uninterpretable standards of exchange, a video record has the effect of a mandatory sentence. It deprives the police of discretion, and the public of leniency. There are many things we'd rather not see or have seen.

GoPro, like Google Glass, has the insidious effect of making the pervasiveness of cameras seem playful and benign when it may one day be anything but. The *Economist* called the film-everything culture

“the people’s panopticon”—the suggestion being that with all these nifty devices we might be unwittingly erecting a vast prison of self-administered surveillance.

Andrew Rossig started BASE jumping in 2004, under the tutelage of an Englishman who was a proponent of “bandit jumping”—that is, jumping off things you are not allowed to. He got his first GoPro in 2010. It was much lighter than existing wearable cameras, which typically involved the camera on one side of the helmet and a battery pack on the other, a strain and a threat to the neck. You might say that a BASE jump consists of two main ingredients: the jump itself and the record of it. The GoPro made feasible part two.

Rossig, a carpenter who works in New York City, building movie sets, began nursing an ambition to film himself leaping off all the city’s iconic tall structures, but it eventually became clear to him that it wasn’t very safe and that the authorities would never permit it. Still, a man could dabble. In 2012, he was arrested, with a fellow BASE jumper named James Brady, while attempting to jump off a thirty-three-story tower in Co-op City, in the Bronx. Not long afterward, they began planning a jump off One World Trade Center, which Brady, an ironworker, had helped to build. They talked about making a movie out of the whole thing or not filming any of it at all. They agreed that it was perhaps unwise and potentially incriminating, at least, to film their conversations and preparations. Still, isn’t the point of jumping off an iconic building to create and share a record of the deed? Rossig felt they had to have footage, at least for the benefit one day of children and grandchildren.

One night last September, the two of them, with a third jumper and a lookout man, sneaked through a hole in the security fence at the construction site and walked up the hundred and four flights to the top of the tower. They wore GoPros on their helmets but opted not

to turn them on, lest the red indicator lights give them away. Only once they were on top of the tower, at the edge, preparing to leap, did they start shooting.

Each of the three jumpers shot footage. The first jumper pulled his chute immediately and soared way out over the Hudson and then tacked back toward the towers. Brady was the second to go; his video would be the most widely distributed. Rossig went last, did a somersault in the air, and pulled his chute later in the plunge than the others. He actually passed Brady. Altogether, the three original videos have been viewed almost three and a half million times on YouTube. One is struck by the tranquillity and silence before the jump, the mixture of reverence and apprehension. Often GoPro undertakings have a frivolous air, but this one's no joke. Their silhouettes are backlit by a vast plain of city lights. One jumper coaxes another, with a gentleness uncommon to GoPro-land. Most striking of all is the vision, once the plummet begins, of the illuminated glass façade of the tower sliding past, the pace accelerating yet oddly slow, almost elegant, with no trace really of violence or terror. In 1878, "Sallie Gardner at a Gallop," in a sense history's first film, depicting a thoroughbred in profile, surprised many viewers who'd previously misconstrued the mechanics of a galloping horse. These days, the drift of One World Trade's lit windows has a similar effect. So this is free fall. The pace shifts abruptly when each jumper pulls his chute. They drift toward the pavement. At the end of each video, the jumper lands in abandoned streets and scurries toward the shadows and a getaway car.

That night, a passerby caught a glimpse of them and called 911. The police checked security footage from the Goldman Sachs building nearby. They noticed a suspicious car, and then, using footage from other cameras in the area, in an ever-widening radius (there are more than four thousand working security cameras and license-plate scanners below Canal Street), they identified the vehicle (apparently,

the N.Y.P.D. keeps a record of every vehicle that crosses into Lower Manhattan) and eventually, in part by subpoenaing cell-phone records, the jumpers themselves, who, in the immediate aftermath of the jump, had dispersed and refrained from calling each other. A month afterward, they got together with thumb drives to watch and share each other's footage of the jump. But once the cops had identified them, five months after the jump, they turned themselves in. It was only then that they posted their jump footage on YouTube, in the hope that the beauty and strangeness of it might persuade the public, if not prosecutors, that they meant no harm.

“The legal advice we got was that we should show we're not bad guys,” Rossig said. “If we're going to get in trouble for it, maybe everyone should see how amazing it was. Who else is going to get that camera angle?”

After a week, the videos had attracted more than three million hits. Still, GoPro's media staff did not reach out to them. “They didn't want to be associated with us,” Rossig said.

He and the others now face numerous charges, including one felony, and as much as seven years in prison. The police have confiscated their cameras. ♦



Nick Paumgarten has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 2005.

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