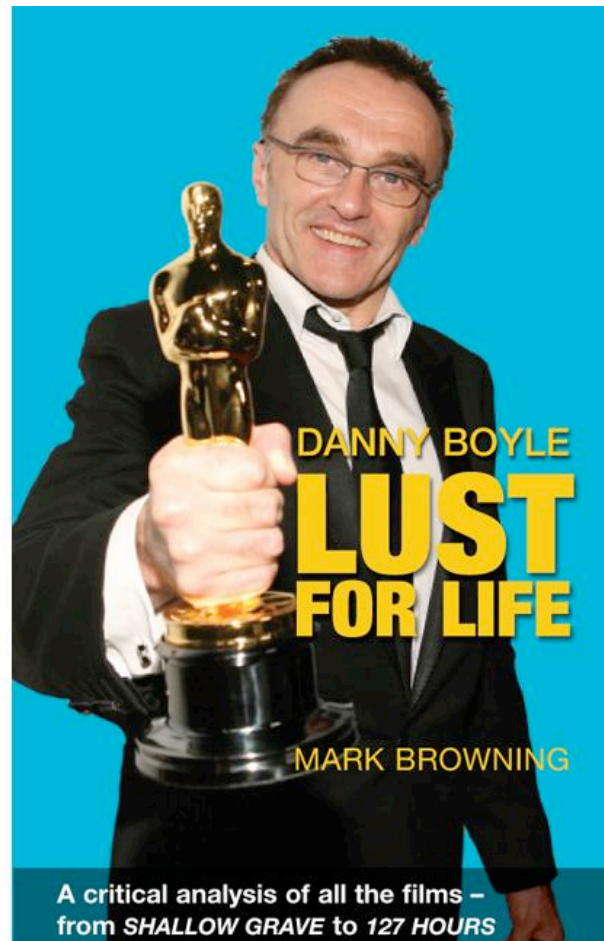


An extract from *Danny Boyle Lust For Life* by Mark Browning

Hollywood's portrayal of landscape has created its own network of mythic values. The Canyonlands National Park where climber Aron Ralston was trapped is not far from Monument Valley, whose iconic scenery was used to such great effect in John Ford westerns like *The Searchers* (1956), reflecting the pain of the lone hero Ethan Edwards (John Wayne). It is a landscape like none other on earth and due to its appropriation in film, has evolved into a repository of cultural, cinematic, philosophical and even religious values, to represent a mythic land of possibilities, self-expression and freedom.

127 Hours appears to offer the pleasure of contemplating a spectacular landscape as backdrop to a gutsy survival tale, but Boyle fairly quickly undercuts this expectation. The film moves from kinetic action to literal stasis as Ralston is trapped, but this does not lead to a desperate search for movement or spectacle in the landscape with tracking shots across the Utah skyline. Physical isolation is the cue for an exploration of mental isolation: Ralston has cut himself off from those around him and the film traces an emotional, and even spiritual, journey as he reconnects with them. We do not learn about the setting during Ralston's 127 hours, much of which takes place without dialogue - the real location is inside his head. It is ultimately not a film about landscape but an urban narrative with its more urgent driving rhythm. The challenge of realising this contradiction may have drawn Boyle to the project, an apparently bizarre choice with little commercial potential but one which he had begun researching before the success of *Slumdog*.



It is Boyle's first attempt at a true-life story with all the limitations this brings, such as the simple fact that much of the audience will know of the hero's final desperate action before they see the film. It therefore also becomes a challenge to Boyle as a filmmaker - how can you make such an apparently grisly experience interesting, when many people already know what they assume is the central key fact about the arm? What leads us to the interior however, is a kinetic establishment of Ralston's existence - a life led in raw and untamed settings. Visual ambition is central to Boyle and he often forces the viewer to question what we think we know, as in *Sunshine* when Fox's sun logo transforms itself into what appears to be the sun, only for this assumption to be then overturned with a sweeping shot that reveals it to be the heat-shield on the front of the spacecraft, Icarus II. In a dynamic shot in *127 Hours*, Ralston jumps from the back of his truck, the shot taking us through a

flap, like a theatrical curtain, with Ralston jumping over the camera itself, taking us into the setting. The landscape is not a backdrop to be looked at and admired; it is a playground, almost an adversary to pit one's wits against. This, together with the clear reference in Fox's marketing copy that the hero ultimately decides to 'choose life,' evokes the kinetic opening of Boyle's breakthrough feature, *Trainspotting*. *127 Hours* might seem, on paper, to be a film about exteriors, an opportunity to celebrate landscape. Certainly musicians have used a similar backdrop for videos, such as The Killers' 'Human' (dir. Danny Drysdale 2008), Dead By Sunrise's 'Crawl Back In' (dir. P.R. Brown 2009) and even Morrissey's 'November Spawned a Monster' (dir. Tim Broad 1990). In all three examples, a lead singer is framed against spectacular desert rock-forms, while miming to a song (and accompanied by musicians in the first two instances). The Killers add out-of-place animals like a tiger, and Dead By Sunrise include pieces of sculpture, but in each case, the landscape is only used to suggest high production values and fairly empty spectacle - there is no narrative taking place within the setting.

What links these examples visually are matters of scale (the human figures are small in contrast to the expanse in which they stand), colour (the backdrop is usually drawn from a palette of golden brown through to red) and aridity (desert and a lack of water predominate). The human figures look out of place and thereby our attention is drawn to them. This setting lends the songs a supposedly epic quality, elevating mundane lyrics to the heights of grand poetry and transposing connotations of ruggedness from the landscape to the singers, all of whom are male. It is an unforgiving landscape, which historically has tested and defined those who have sought to colonise it.

There is a closer similarity between Boyle's film and Robbie Williams' video for 'Bodies' (dir. Vaughan Arnell 2009) in terms of style and content. Both feature sweeping helicopter-shots, edited together with small jump-cuts, focused on a lone male figure, who is off-roading on a bike, including pulling wheelies for no other reason than the sheer pleasure it brings. The landscape is dusty, iconic of the American west (Arnell shot in the Mojave desert; Boyle in Utah). Williams' video differs from the other examples mentioned in that it shifts to the more conventional 'miming mode' only in the final section of the film (and it does feel closer to a film than a video) as he stands upon the wing of an abandoned aircraft. Both heroes suffer technical problems and both are 'rescued' by the convenient attention of attractive women (Williams' motorbike breaks down and he is picked up by a girl, Ayda Field, in a buggy; Ralston crashes, picks himself up and later comes across two attractive female hikers). However, whereas Williams' video suggests the arrival of a woman provides a saviour for the hero, for Boyle women play a more tangential role. The backpackers that Ralston meets, Kristi (Kate Mara) and Megan (Amber Tamblyn), find him attractive but too self-absorbed to be worth pursuing and the narrative focuses firmly on a tale of male hubris transformed into chastened self-preservation. Ralston's sister Sonya (Lizzy Caplan) and girlfriend (Clémence Poésy) exist to provide material for his mental processes: shown like alternative films, they are the means by which he works through his thoughts.

The rugged, unforgiving landscape evokes the nature of America as a frontier nation, created in a spirit of westward expansionism that celebrated individual freedom and connoted a sense of religious destiny, as well as requiring qualities of endurance and toughness stereotypically associated with masculinity. All of these qualities, especially the notion of individual freedom, are conveyed in the juxtaposition of singer and setting. It is an impossible situation - we know the singer is not performing, since there are no trailing wires from the instruments, no microphones and in Williams' case, not even a semblance of performing the song we hear until the end of the video. It

has become a convention of music videos which audiences rarely question but it does mean our attention is drawn away from the non-existent performance to the setting in which it takes place.

Stylistically, the Williams and Boyle pieces are close. Boyle tends to use aerial movement over and across his lone hero, rather than rotating around him but even so, there is a similar blend of sudden increases in film speed and then a few frames of slow-motion and time lapse photography as the sun passes across the landscape (also reminiscent of *The Beach*). Both feature close-ups of spinning tyres - in *127 Hours* as an overhead, point-of-view shot of Ralston looking down at his front wheel, and in 'Bodies' as a wide-angle-lens shot of Williams getting onto his bike and spinning dust into the camera. Both men are casting themselves as heroes in their own fantasy adventure, akin to the lone male biker figure popularised by stars like Steve McQueen. The landscape also has spiritual overtones, drawing on America's historical westward colonisation, justified by notions of Manifest Destiny. Such spiritual connotations in music videos are rarely explicit, except by openly Christian bands such as The Lighthouse Family, or in country and western, where the setting can be as much of a cliché as the lyrical content. Musically, even the opening bars of Williams' song with its echoing choral style, before we reach the explicitly religious content of the chorus, suggest that the lone figure is undergoing some kind of spiritual epiphany, an impression enforced by the shot of Williams raising his hands aloft from the handlebars at the music's climactic moment. In *127 Hours*, Ralston's struggle can either be seen as being about the smallness of humanity in the face of a natural world created by a benevolent God, or the rebellious hubris of humanity struggling against an inhospitable environment. The ultimate lesson Ralston learns is not to humble himself before an all-powerful creator but to accept his role in the fabric of society, particularly amongst his friends and family (the subject of his flashbacks): the resolution is therefore a humanist one.

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