

## CHRISTOPHER GLEN / Hybrid Ground, Grouse Grind

The Trail that has become known as the Grouse Grind, as opposed to the BCMC (British Columbia Mountain Club Trail) or other variants, originated with the hardy, but canny, old hikers kitty-cornering it to the cable car that services Grouse Mountain's ski facility for the easy way out. Its development came from the back country hiking community, who used it to keep the hiking body ticking over while marooned in the city. With time, the improvised trail was improved, largely by the same community. The trail took a cultural turn in the early 1990s, when Grouse Mountain, riding the wave of enthusiasm for more challenging "events" and the representations thereof—think Banff Film Festival, and all the hyped "extreme" things that now make the ordinary seem more and more mundane, not worth getting off the couch for—established an event called "The Race" and also coined "The Grouse Grind."<sup>1</sup> Yes the grind that many take to be part of mundane popular culture, is also The Grind, and whenever it is pertinent, The Grind®. The bare bones of it: over 2.9 kilometers, with

inclines of up to 30° for much of the way, and gains of 850 odd meters in elevation.<sup>2</sup>

Part of a more or less frequent exercise regimen for many, the trail puts routine users and neophytes, as with other supposedly polarized solitudes, in regular passing contact. Regulars and their affines don't need much of the cautionary introduction, although they can certainly generate enough chatter of their own on what the Grind "does" for them. However routine the Grind is for some, there is inevitably a lot of wariness about drawing the uninitiated into an activity that can seriously test them. It's a popular draw, over-hyped even, opening it up to the ill-prepared, be it shoes, water supplies, or physical and psychological experience of such exertion. One sees it often enough, misery embodied, completely at odds with what they've been talked into, often with somewhat sympathetic friends, encouraging or cajoling. "Can't!" "Next Switchback." In the end, do it they pretty well "must," barring real mishap and mobilization of North Shore Rescue. The key is to rec-

<sup>1</sup>A name that originates in much the same way a new subdivision's street names might, albeit with its perceived edge, from a decision making body around a table. The North Shore Mountain biking community will crisscross their patch with even edgier names. The Grouse Grind should sediment down into the culture unproblematically, unlike say, The Baden Powell Trail, or even, dare one say it, British Columbia. Witness the crosscurrents of the Strait and all the naming that the Vancouver's and Quadra's of the world unleashed with their own proprietary ambitions, not yet legally secured. The Grind® is interesting. The trail begins and ends on Grouse Mountain property. The

trail itself is in Greater Vancouver Regional District hands. They maintain it, and have vastly improved it at taxpayers' cost (a good thing), working against the, at times, rapid erosion. Aesthetically, the stone work seems very much superior to the timbered steps.

<sup>2</sup>By way of comparison, for those who would do this kind of elevation gain by car, the Cypress Bowl road from marked kilometer 2, to unmarked kilometer 12 rises about 700 meters over 10 kilometers, or for the true North Vancouver comparison, over approximately 12 kilometers the road up Mount Seymour gains about 900 meters.

ognize that it is only purgatory, not hell. It will end even if you have to draw on all your companions' indulgences. Basic health and a level of fitness apart, careful pacing (whatever pace) is crucial. Soldier on, and don't let the pacey passerby (grinding flâneur, or flâneuse perhaps) distract you. More perversely, and as an aside to most advisories, yes watch hydration, but hydration alone won't do it. The first-timer feeling bushwhacked needs only look around to see more or less intense approaches, different levels of expectation. There will be people churning by, others teeter-tottering, many chit-chatting, catching up with friends, or out with only their cell phones (catching up with friends . . . whatever). If one can get over the humps—not a real hike, too crowded, prefer the BCMC with the cultural undercurrents of in/authenticity<sup>3</sup> and vulgarization, it turns out to be what you make of it, a grind to be endured or relished.

A passing problem is how to address the Grind's exceptionalism without offering grist to the Vancouver mill of self-congratulation that so craves world-class standing. The Grind is, in a way, an extraordinary outcome of the proximity of a metropolitan fringe to the front country of the Coastal Range, which with a turn here, or

twist there might well feel like back country to some. (A governor general wearing the wrong shoes might believe herself to be in the Rockies no less.) It is, after all, North Shore Rescue's backyard. There is a lot of other hiking (and biking, and skiing and snowshoeing and...) on all that front country terrain. But there is only one Grind.

The lynchpin that makes it possible for this particular trail to become The Grind, is of course the gondola. Yes, one can hike down the Grind. Some do. For all the pain that the uninitiated feel they are suffering in going up, the real pain, and potential damage is done coming down. It is not for nothing that one of the North Shore's other events is called "The Knee Knacking" (48 km from Horseshoe Bay to Deep Cove, up *and* down three mountains). Going up the Grind, however, is compatible with a fair number of sports injuries, a good number of aging knees and, ask any regular, the bangs-for-exercising-buck are remarkable. The bell curves of physical attributes are well represented in who turns out for the Grind, often surprisingly so, but a lot of darned good athletes throw it into the mix for good reason and few of them have any inclination for hurtin' in the wrong places.

The gondola is of course part of Grouse Mountain's ski facility and the service it provides people who do the Grind is, to say the least, much appreciated. It is the crucial source of the Grind's popularity. For the most part, it works, bar the downloading pile-ups of busy summer days, and the entrapment in the gon-

<sup>3</sup>The authenticity of the Grind apart, its specificity stands up well in comparison to what a *Globe and Mail* Feb. 20, 2009 piece called "Tower Running" i.e. using high rise stairwells as treadmills. If one can get over the hurdles of security, and if the "being there" of the stairwell suits, it is an option, which like the Grind has its aficionados. With permission, it seems the Empire State Building has served the purpose, and the views are accredited "world class" on a day with good visibility.

dola going down. Listening to the mix of safety announcement, hospitality, and marketing often enough allows the so-inclined to note the performance.

The gondola is not the only infrastructural prosthetic that enables the exercise routine. There's a lot of horsepower in that parking lot plus a short drive to piping hot water so that the righteously exercised can get on with Vancouver lives. Something so ordinary, for some, like so much else is predicated on the wherewithal of our moment in modernity. Lucky for some, the when and where of history would suggest that for most of time, the ordinariness of the Grind would be unimaginable. A possible replication of the Grind, in say Cape Town, up Table Mountain, on the Platteklip Gorge route, and down in the cable car is imaginable. It is all right there, in much the same way. It is a different city where the presumptions of modernity are distributed very differently. Attention to personal wellbeing by somewhat frequent grinding is by some measures a luxury (which might be hard to figure for those over-committed souls struggling up). In the same vein, one suspects strongly that energy-use audits for the self-propelled crowd would produce a fair amount of wincing.

But there it is on the North Shore, very northern, very western, very Pacific north-western, used as one of the very Vancouver strands by which the city is branded in certain markets. For the moment, the branding of Vancouver is massively overdetermined by one of the world's mega/meta brands, the Olympics (a ferocious defender of its <sup>TM</sup> and <sup>®</sup>—witness its going to the corners with Team Canada,

likewise committed to the business of <sup>TM</sup> and <sup>®</sup>, albeit wrapped in a nationally thicker blanket of sentiment). Under the debris of that avalanche (yes, the Cultural Olympiad allows for some gems, some critical engagement so long as you can track them down, have your peeps on and television off), the grind, The Grind, The Grouse Grind<sup>®</sup> is drawn upon for niche markets of adventure ecotourism. It is bear country, the hazard can be extreme and, head-lamp-ascents apart, it is not a place to over-night. Grouse Mountain makes of it what it can. The further one is, culturally, from the mundane ordinariness of grinding, the more likely the aura of "extreme adventure ecotourism" will prevail. While the primary assets are the ski hill in the winter and the theme park in the summer (enclosed bears, "wild lumberjacks," gondola rides over what passes for wolf habitat) maximizing the seasonally regulated flow of people on the Grind helps. Thus The Grind<sup>®</sup>, The T-shirt and so on.

The boundaries between inventing and capitalizing on popular phenomena are often complicated both as a matter of origins and as a matter of what becomes of them with time. So too, with the Grind, the entanglements with never so simple popular culture can be observed. Minor key stuff, but symptomatic nonetheless. The Grouse Grind<sup>®</sup> is Grouse Mountain's intellectual property notwithstanding the fact that much (but less than one might think) of the trail itself is on Greater Vancouver Regional District land, and is a public trail. Grouse Mountain owns/leases the land at either end of the trail as part of the ski hill and gondola-servicing operations. By virtue of their location, they are able to

capitalize on the upward stream of hikers, and make a buck or two ferrying them down. Ownership of The Grind® is a different matter altogether. As noted above, it started with the event, the race that became named The Grouse Grind® (quite likely drawing on some wag in the woods of popular culture whose mutter, like an Andean potato, got chosen and “turned into” intellectual property without a magical realist in earshot). This is the key in the cultural apparatus that marketing uses to help brand Grouse Mountain. The trail itself is really just like the water in the can of Coke that Coca-Cola so assiduously wraps in secret recipe, caffeine, and an extraordinary amount of cultural baggage. Nothing is as simple as the trail that exerts one and the water that rehydrates. All the chatter and grousing about the grind, be it interior monologue or word of mouth, amplified in the local field of public representations allows for a symbiosis between marketing and the culture at large that can only be a boon to Grouse Mountain. Looking to deepen the experience, or perhaps the complicities in a world of curiously engendered communities, Grouse Mountain would have one join The Grouse Grind® Community, Facebook facilitated. That further step brings one closer to the fate of ‘OncoMouse™ on his or her assorted trials and treadmills.<sup>4</sup> The endorsement of the Grind, sans ®, in popular culture is the best possible endorsement of The Grouse Grind® as it is circulated further and further afield as part of a bundle of “to do’s” in “Destination Vancouver,” sometimes, even more specifically “Destination

North Vancouver.” So along with, say, the Capilano Suspension Bridge, tourist trap for some, satisfactory outing for others, the Grind is offered as Canada’s most popular trail (probably a numbers game, so tough luck the Rockies; the Sea Wall, a local rival, is well, just a walk in the park). “Mother Nature’s Stairmaster” gets the attention in the hybrid gym/ground category although I worry that Stairmaster should be Stairmaster® or is that Treadmaster™? I don’t know or care because I don’t do gyms.

There is another twist in the tale of the trail’s divide between franchised “official” that is ® public and irregular popular public. For many, most even, one emerges from the forest walk, and one does or does not touch the rock. You are “there,” more or less, a place in the sun, if the sun is out. If one is bothered, that is or can be your Grind time. It doesn’t help that with so many people grinding, erosion around the said rock has progressed so rapidly that geological time looks to be undercutting, maybe even underscoring grind times. But there you are, with a time. There is also, however, the aforementioned “race.” Very public and with that, the way of the world, has its muscling imperatives. The event (along with its sponsors—including my bank, so again I “pay” for it) must be amplified, i.e. televised, because that is how that part of it works. Just as they messed with the pure distance of the 26-mile Olympic marathon for royalty

<sup>4</sup>For more, go to Donna J Haraway, *Modest Witness\_@Second Millenium\_FemaleMan@\_Meets\_Oncomouse™*, Routledge, 1977.

sitting in their box 385 yards<sup>5</sup> away, so they messed with “our” times on the Grind for the television coverage. Grind on to the *official* finish line, with the radio frequency chip attached to your Grind™ Timer Card (time takes to commodification every which way it can), and have your time recorded, displayed, tabulated for the small public that cares. Ignore the rock (what would they say on the far side), ignore the amaordinaries<sup>6</sup> basking in their having done it (but not quite, officially). All for the dictates of the camera, that section of open ground that allows the event to be televised. What does it matter? Very little. It’s just the question that so of

ten comes with mention of the Grind. Your time, even if the question only draws disdain from some, does tell something. After that, as with any cultural practice, its so what-ness is not containable. It is what one makes of it. It’s what one brings to grinding, be it from Cape Town’s Table Mountain or Teheran’s Alborz Mountains, from the Lake District or Himalayas, the Sea Wall or Buntzen Lake trail, the sofa or the treadmill.<sup>7</sup> It is also more than that as is “told” by the encrusting public culture which saturates popular culture, not always alive to the proprietary entanglements.

<sup>5</sup>I wanted to fact-check this 385 yards, just the distance, and Google messed with the whole story. The one some of us have lived with for a long time. Check out Google on the length of the marathon and you will see why I don’t want to change it. Royalty was involved and accommodating them was very much at issue. They were a lot less public then, and the public had a lot less piping hot water then. That is just the beginning of the race and the story of distance. I’m not changing the story because the meanings it produced over time seem to stand a test other than the one of exactly how the distance got to be set.

<sup>6</sup>Amaordinaries. The prefix ama- in Zulu translates as people, or people of. I once came across a reference in South African cultural studies to the “ama-respectables”. It was a derogatory designation used by the shebeen crowd partial to jazz for the church going, choral music crowd, another two solitudes whose borders were likely more permeable than allowed.

<sup>7</sup>Always worth remembering, while the grind is a long way from the NHL and the English Premier Division, but not far enough from the Olympics (a knackered knee away on Cypress Mountain, where they have messed with the Baden Powell trail), those expensive energetic bodies of elite athletes are, in a sense, loss leaders, to get bums on seats watching what it is all, bottom line, really about—marketing, warm fuzzy feeling about the Olympics notwithstanding.



Dan Siney, *Trees After Rain*, 2008  
C-Print, 152 x 102 cm, Courtesy the artist