

## **Representing ‘authentic’ surfer identities in “pure” surf films**

Surf films...are invaluable resources for historians of sport subcultures...they have the potential to reveal aspects of the past and the present. (Booth, 1996: p. 324)

‘Pure’ surf films, were produced over a twenty-five year period by surfers for distribution within the surfing community. These films played a crucial role in the development of surfing through their production, distribution and representation of surfing values. As Booth (1996) in his article, “Surfing Films and Videos: Adolescent Fun, Alternative Lifestyle, Adventure Industry”, argues, they are therefore invaluable resources in the study of surf culture. This chapter develops Booth’s analysis of surf films as a genre extending his classification of the surf film genre and identifying the ways they reflected surf history and socio cultural concerns. A generic approach, drawing mainly from the work of film critics, particularly Altman (1989, 1999), is used to analyse the films locating them within surf culture, history and surfing’s wider societal context (Neale, 2000; Thwaites, 1994).

A number of issues should be addressed in genre analysis such as iconography, narratives, audiences, marketing and distribution as all contribute to the identification of surf films as a genre. Altman (1989) calls for an examination of semantic (iconography) and syntactic (narrative, themes) issues. In surf films the semantic approach might relate to surfboards, waves and their stars such as Nat Young and Phil Edwards. However, Altman argues, iconography should also be considered within the context of syntax; plot and thematic issues. In this approach he extends Kitses (1969) semiotic analysis which identified the importance of the civilization/nature thematic binary underpinning western narratives. Drawing on Fiske’s semiotic analysis of the beach (1991), I used this approach to analyse John Milius’s Big Wednesday (1978) and The Endless Summer (1964) concluding that both films contained strong thematic binaries of the nature/culture relationship (Ormrod, 2005, 2008). This binary

was located within the American frontier myth (Slotkin, 2000) in the discussion and analysis of these two films. Altman further argues in favour of analyzing a wider corpus of films in a study of genre to draw more meaningful conclusions. Furthermore, Altman (1999) amends his earlier approach to include audiences and marketing as key factors in the classification and analysis of a film genre, issues which are also crucial to the development of surf films (Beattie, 1999). Genre responds and is constructed through audience expectations. It is also a product of socio-cultural issues. This chapter demonstrates how surf films were constructed through complex interplay between mainstream cultural and historical trends in addition to subcultural issues. Semantic and syntactic issues are located within the development of surf films as responding to changing values and surfing in the twenty-five year period, 1955-1980. In this period surfing developed from the carefree Malibu period of the mid fifties to early sixties to the hippie idylls of soul surfing in the mid sixties onwards and from the mid seventies the return to prominence of pro-surfing. Studying “pure” surf films presents an opportunity to trace the interaction between audiences and the media, and to expand upon Booth’s earlier work, and identify how these values translated on screen and to what extent films responded to mainstream and surf culture. Three main issues are identified in the analysis; authenticity, masculinity and subcultural values. I begin by exploring the literature on surfing values and the subcultural media and research into the surf film genre before mapping out a typology of surf films. This will identify “pure” surf films within their generic context.

### **Researching surfing values in subcultural media**

Most subcultural analysis of surfing media has concentrated on magazines (Wheaton 2000a; Henderson 2001; Ormrod 2007; Henderson 1999) and those that have discussed surf films tend to concentrate on audiences and audience behaviours (Beattie 2001) or on one particular film (Ormrod 2008). Other studies of surf films have either been incorporated in a wider study of surf culture (Kampion 1998; Warshaw 1997) or constitute a descriptive account of surfing on

film (Thoms 2000). Thoms book on surf films is, perhaps, the most significant account of surfing on film as it is written by a surf journalist who collected substantial materials from the seventies and who has also written reviews of films for surf magazines such as Tracks. (Delaney 1976; Thoms 1978, 1978, 1975) As such, it is an incisive and exhaustive account of the history of surfing on film from early actualities to some of the more significant contemporary surf 'vids' (videos). It is, therefore, a valuable resource in any research on surfing on film. However, Thoms's aim is to focus on Australian surfing films; so although he discusses some of the more significant American films, it is within the context of Australian film production.

Booth (1996) proposes that a crucial aspect of the ways surfing is culturally constructed is in its various representations on film, whether it be mainstream films such as Point Break (1991), subcultural representations of surfing as in The Endless Summer (1964), or through surf vids by directors such as Taylor Steele. He goes further, claiming that surf films informed surfers of the "authentic" surfing lifestyle by encoding notions of adventure and hedonism in their narratives and, "explain[ed] surfing and surfers to themselves" (Carroll, 1991: p. 319). In this analysis I use three case studies of films which acted as exemplars of their socio-historic contexts: in the early sixties, Surfing Hollow Days (Brown 1961), The Crystal Voyager (Elphick and Falzon 1973) and Free Ride (Delaney 1976). All three represent images of surfer identity that epitomise the values of their socio historic contexts. Where Booth paid great attention to the adventure and fun aspects of surfing promoted by these films I will focus on authenticity, surfer identities and masculinity in particular through the stars of the films and the rhetoric expressed about surfing and waves. Although issues of race and issues of female gender identities are other significant issues in this discussion by their sheer absence in the films, they have been discussed elsewhere in this collection (Wheaton 2009) and it is unnecessary to repeat them indepth here. Of the films discussed only one woman surfer is

included (Surfing Hollow Days). However, I acknowledge that there could be some interesting issues raised in articles examining the role of women in surfing in films such as Gidget (Wendkos 1959), Blue Crush (Stockwell 2002) and Ride the Wild Surf (Taylor 1964). I do, however, acknowledge that a study of women surfers in films and how race or the racialization of surfing is performed on film would be fascinating topics and possible future projects.

### **Surfing on film – modes, audiences and narratives**

#### **Diagram to show the range of film types representing surfing [see attached]**

In Booth's article (1996), of the three surf film types he describes how, "pure" surf films and surf vids are contingent upon film and video technology: surf vids changed audiences' screening and viewing patterns. Where a surf film's screening was a special event, surf vids might be screened in bars or surf shops as background "noise". Surf vids also represented the move away from small scale production and distribution of surf culture towards escalating globalization and commercialisation of the sport. Therefore "pure" surf films and surf vids production, distribution and audiences' experience change between 1955-1980 and 1980 to the present.<sup>1</sup>

Booth's original three classifications can be expanded to encompass a greater range of surf films. As noted above, surf films can fall into other categories such as teen exploitation, rock 'n' roll, comedy if they are fiction or travelogue or avant garde if they are documentary. They can also appeal to niche or mainstream audiences. Taking fiction films produced for more general audiences first, Booth's description of "Hollywood" films infers America is the only source of these films production. However, Australia has produced a number of films with surfing backgrounds (Puberty Blues (Beresford 1981), Summer City (Fraser 1977) as has the UK Blue Juice (Prechezer 1995). Therefore, it might be more appropriate to subsume these films under a broader classification, 'Films with a surfing background'. Within this group there

are at least two different types of surf film, the exploitation film and the big budget film: the former films tend to cluster around the surf boom era in the late fifties to mid sixties in America, the second around later production aimed at a broader audience.

The surf boom was inspired by a number of factors, most notably for the purposes of this discussion, the film Gidget (1959) based upon the encounter between teenager, Kathy Kohner and a group of Malibu surfers. This encounter was recorded in a bestselling book, a film, a television series and numerous comics and copycat films aimed at the rapidly growing teen market, exploiting the boom in surfing. The sixty-six surfing related films produced between 1959-66 exploited the youth market using teen idol stars and pop music to promote notions of kids on the beach having fun with just a hint that there was a little more going on in the sand dunes than barbeques (Doherty, 2002) . Surfboard technology at this time was undergoing a revolution from expensive balsa wood to use of foam derived from the Californian aircraft industry. Use of foam in the manufacture of surfboard blanks meant shapers and manufacturers could produce surfboards quicker and more cheaply. These lighter boards were also easier to ride. These fuelled the surf craze and also caused some unease in surfing subcultures, especially in Malibu where the waves became increasingly crowded. These films have been given much academic attention in studies of subcultures on film (Caine 2001), teen exploitation (Morris 1993), race (Rutsky 1999) and gender (Ormrod 2002), issues which emerge in below in “pure”surf film content and revisionist films.

The second type of surfing background films, dubbed ‘revisionist’ beach party movies by Booth, are bigger budget and emerged after the demise of soul surfing films (Booth 1996). Again surfing is a background to the main action which aims at the teen market in films such as Fast Times at Ridgemount High (1982) and Surf Ninjas (1993). Like their exploitative cousins, these revisionist surf films focus on issues such as gender in Point Break (Bigelow 1991), Blue Crush (Stockwell 2002), Big Wednesday, (Milius 1978) and teen exploitation/

comedy in Fast Times at Ridgemount High (Heckerling, 1982) and Orange County (Rudin 2002).

The second main type of surf related films is in the non-fiction mode. Thoms (1999) lists newsreels reporting Surf Lifesaving Association of Australia (SLSAA) carnivals as some of the first surfing on film. These films were produced for a wider audience to be screened as part of a film show along with an A and B mainstream film. In contrast, “pure”surf films were produced for niche audiences and tended to be documentaries using a travelogue narrative. They were produced, distributed and screened to niche surfing audiences on the four wall circuit. The four wall circuit consisted of small venues such as village and school halls, civic centres and surf clubs across America in the 1950s. The four wall model was adopted in Australia and the United Kingdom throughout the sixties and seventies and greatly influenced the behaviour of surf film audiences who indulged in unruly behaviour hooting and hollering at the onscreen action (Beattie 2001). These films can also be classified into different subsections according to surfing values portrayed: the travelogues of the 1950s and sixties, soul surfing films of the mid sixties to mid seventies and the films after Free Ride (1976) which emphasised a more pro surfing lifestyle. What is significant about these films is that their classification is dependent upon the date of their production and technological constraints as noted above. Furthermore, the historic development of “pure”surf films cannot be dissociated from surfing history for genre conventions, “embody the crucial ideological concerns of the time in which they are popular”, (Fiske, 1989: p. 110). This notion is discussed below first in an by identification of changing surf culture values and then through the analysis and comparison of these values encapsulated in the three films analysed.

### **Surf culture and changing surf values 1955-1980**

THWAITES AND BARTHES HERE – USE QUOTE

Film genres develop as a result of social, economic and cultural factors. This is particularly true of surf films in the twenty-five year period covered in this chapter. 1955-1980 is a short, but significant period in surfing history as it saw surfing develop from a niche sport in California and Hawaii to a globalised and commodified culture. Surfboard technology and media exploitation was partially responsible for this changing demographic in the early sixties as young people clamoured to watch brainless surfsploitation teenpics, play surf pop music and buy into surfer cool through accessories and clothing. However, within the subculture authenticity was predicated upon the ability to surf and pseudosurfers, those who bought to look but did not surf, were regarded with disdain (see below).

Booth notes how surfer lifestyles respond to 'cultural and temporal variations' (Booth, 2003: p. 316) and these variations can also be identified in "pure" surf films. The materials discovered and analysed tended to focus on Californian surfers, soul surfers and the abrasive generation and these styles emerge between 1955-80 as a result of global and national discourses. The Californian period spans the 1950s to the mid sixties; the soul surfing period spans the mid sixties to the mid seventies and the rise of pro surfing emerges in the mid seventies to the early eighties. The discussion of surfing films will concentrate on American and Australian surfing and films, because in the sixties and seventies primary source materials such as surf magazines, films and interviews in the sixties and seventies indicate these two nations dominated surf technique and equipment. I have discussed the changes in surfing values previously (Ormrod, 2007) but as a crude overview, the Malibu period corresponds with the predominance of Californian values such as freedom, individuality, hedonism, nomadism and youth culture in surfing. The late fifties to the mid sixties a surf craze, emanating from California, developed. It was the result of a mixture of exploitation in films and pop music of popular teen culture and developments in surfboard manufacturing which made the mass production of surfboards

quicker and cheaper. The surf craze was imported to Australia which had a thriving surf culture in the late fifties and was responsible for a shift in surfing values.

Up to the late fifties Australian surfing developed along an institutional route; through the activities of the SLSAA. The primary aim of the association was to provide the best resources for lifesaving and the values of the association promoted an almost militaristic emphasis on the discipline of the body through regulations and competition. However, the arrival of Californian surfing in Australia prompted some surfers to break away from the SLSAA and form their own surfing communities with values reflecting the hedonism and individuality of their American counterparts (Pearson 1979; Booth 2001; Booth 2003, 2004, 1996, 1991). The move towards Californian values inspired Australian surfers to experiment with surfboard shapes, technology and surf technique, so that by the mid sixties they constituted a threat to American supremacy of the waves and surf technique<sup>3</sup>. The antagonism between American surfers and Australian surfers resulted, perhaps, from the blow to American pride in their defeat at the San Diego World Surfing Championships in 1964 and 1966 by Australian surfers. Young recalls, “Up till then Australia had basically been a mimic of America and it was an exciting moment when Australian surfers found they could suddenly leap ahead of their American counterparts” (Young and McGregor 1987: p.103).

From the late sixties to the mid seventies surfing was in turmoil with antagonism between American and Australian surfers over who ruled the waves and a move away from competition towards a dropout lifestyle challenging conformity and moving surfing back to its radical, countercultural roots (Booth 2004). Soul surfers’ values reflected hippie countercultural values and stressed a return to the land and rejection of competition in surfing. Unlike hotdoggers who slid down the wave on longboards, thanks to new technology, soul surfers emphasised flowing and interacting with the wave (Booth 2003, 2004). The rise of prosurfing in the mid seventies reflected a more aggressive, urban spirit, “attacking [the wave] from all



angles and reducing it to shreds” (Booth, 2003: p.325). This change in culture owed much to Australia’s ‘scramble for sport’ and in 1974 this led to the formation of the Australian Professional Surfing Association (APSA) solely for the aim of organising contests. Australian pro-surfers such as Peter Townend, Mark Warren and Ian Cairns (collectively known as ‘The Bronzed Aussies’) were quick to develop their strong presence in world surfing from that point, adopting hype to raise their profiles and targeting the most strategic competitions to enter. Indeed Fred Hemmings, so notable in the development of competition, stated that Australians deserved to be the top surfers in the world, “...because they’re the first group of surfers who’ve taken a thoroughly professional attitude to surfing...they act like pros wherever they go” (Jarratt, 1977: p. 33).

This is a crude model of these periods as soul surfers continued to exist and thrive after the mid seventies (and to develop through a resurgence in longboarding in contemporary surfing) and Malibu hot doggers continued to surf on longboards after the mid sixties. As global communication between different surfing nations was erratic, changes in surfboard technology might take longer to filter into isolated surf cultures. Moreover, the types of waves informed the types of surfboards surfers found most effective and although the shortboard became very popular from the mid sixties, local surf shapers often adapted boards to local conditions.

(Wheaton 2005; Ormrod 2007) However, for the purposes of this discussion these periods are significant because the changes in surfing values informed the ideological values encoded in surf films. These values were produced by surfers at the centre of surf culture, mainly America and Australia and disseminated globally through surf media such as magazines and films.

### **“Pure” surf film conventions**

ALTMAN HERE – SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC

CONVENTIONS ALSO USE GUNNING AND NON NARRATIVE EARLY

HOLLYWOOD

PRODUCTION AND NARRATIVE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

Bud Browne pioneered the “pure”surf film when in 1953 he spliced together some footage of his Hawaiian surf holidays, hired Adams Junior High School of Santa Monica, charged 65 cents admission and screened, Hawai’ian Surf Trips (Browne 1953) to a sell out audience. As Warshaw (who attended one of Browne’s film shows) attests, “...for 90 minutes Browne had defied the cliché, becoming the host with vacation pictures that other people actually wanted to see” (Warshaw, 1999: p. 10). From their origins in holiday home movies, “pure”surf films were constructed by their distribution and screening which had a great impact on their generic conventions. Thoms notes how “pure”surf films owed much to the documentary genre in which, “...they harked back to the earliest actualities” also travel documentaries to Hawai’i”, (Thoms, 2000: p. 69). The films’ narrative structure was based upon the ‘surfari’, travelling to find the perfect, wave and they would often feature a wipeout at the climax. Some practices of the film screening were to predate the ways video is played (Cubbitt 1991; Ellis 1996). The projectionist for instance, might rewind the film to show a particularly interesting wave, or slow the film down to show the ride more fully. These practices replicated some of the films’ narrative, for instance in use of slow-mo in Witzig’s films or in the speeding up of comedy sequences in Bruce Brown’s films.

Browne’s films established both production and distribution systems in addition to screening and generic narrative conventions. His production values were based upon experimentation and a DIY ethic. He filmed, “...overhead shots using a plane, slow motion – slowing rides by 150% and shooting from the water with a camera ‘waterproofed inside a rubber bag” (Thoms, 2000: p. 69). This do-it-yourself ethic was replicated by later surf film producers such as Bruce Brown and George Greenough (see below).

Early surf films narrative structure consisted of several surfing sequences strung together with some comedic sections. This bricolage of filmed segments with little classical narrative cause

and effect was similar to early travel films in which several short sequences were randomly edited together (Musser, 1990). As Browne's films were silent in the fifties, it was necessary for him to attend the screening and act as a master of ceremonies providing his commentary over the film. Of necessity then, Browne also established a model for the distribution and exhibition of surf films on a circuit of school halls, surf clubs and local venues. The 'four-wall' circuit bore similarities to the distribution and exhibition of travel and anthropological films in the early twentieth century in small venues around the coast. By the early 1960s Browne had sufficient funds to add a soundtrack and voice over to the films. This meant he could exhibit his films without the necessity of attending to contribute a commentary. However, the master of ceremonies role had, by this time become a regular feature of surf film screenings and contributed to the carnival atmosphere of the events.

Significantly, Browne's success in the developing Malibu surfing scene inspired other surfers to become filmmakers. The most notable surf film producers in the late fifties and early sixties were Greg Noll, John Severson and Bruce Brown. All three were instrumental in the development of Californian surfing at this time, Noll as a big wave rider and surfboard maker, Severson as a filmmaker who produced Surfer magazine as a promotional tool for his film, Surf Fever, and Bruce Brown who produced films notably The Endless Summer (1964) which was to become the most famous and lucrative of all "pure" surf films. This film was to establish the surfari as a dream quest endlessly re-enacted in films and magazines such as Surfer. This, in turn, was crucial in making the perfect wave the organising myth of surf media (Scheibel, 1995). Thanks to the developing global surf market, surf media emanating from California was disseminated around the globe, most notably in the context of surfing, to Australia.

Surf films developed alongside the growing popularity of American style surfing in Australia, and from the mid sixties Australia became an increasingly important player on the global surf scene. In this ERA, "pure" surf movies began, like surf culture, to adopt countercultural values

in line with the rhetoric expressed in surf magazines (Henderson 1999, 2001; Ormrod 2007). These films were earnest, containing few or no comedy sequences, and they depicted a romanticised lifestyle, often a retreat from the crowds and cities into the wilderness or the rural landscape. They often also featured imagery reminiscent of drug induced surf sessions inside the tube. Filmmakers also used pirated versions of progressive rock bands' music such as Deep Purple and Pink Floyd on the soundtrack. Soul surfing films were avant garde, in narrative and aesthetic construction. This experimental approach was pioneered by Paul Witzig who steered the surf movies away from the travelogue to more esoteric themes in films such as The Hot Generation (1967) and Evolution (1969). Using underground filming techniques and a music soundtrack to evoke emotions and aesthetic values his films were described as, "...stoked paeans of organic bliss and tubular escape" (Kampion, 1998: p. 112). Surfers and waves reflected values such as the relationship between man and nature, aesthetics, and brotherly love. They also picked up apocalyptic scenarios of doom from hippie counterculture (Booth 2004).

ESTABLISH IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING IN GENRE

The titles of soul surfing films are a strong indication of their hippie roots: Cosmic Children (Jepson, 1970), Morning of the Earth (Falzon, 1972) and Pacific Vibrations (Severson, 1970a). The logline of Pacific Vibrations could apply to all: "An example of man in harmony with nature...A life that doesn't emphasise materialism. Have a good time. The Natural Way. A witness of the Truth". These films charted the development of the short board era from the mid to late sixties. In this period surfboards shrunk from twelve to five or six feet in length and the introduction of fins enabled faster more interactive engagement with the wave. Witzig's films showed surfing audiences the shapes of new boards, often before they reached Australia. The posters, as in many surfmovies before him evoked notions of the sea as wilderness. For instance, the poster for Evolution heralds the evolution, "as it travels around the world exploring surfing's unknown territory".

By the mid 1970s soul surfing was overtaken by a new, urban aggressive surf style (Booth 2003). In mainstream surfing this was expressed in the growing ascendancy of competitive values and the emergence of pro-surfers whose values were expressed in Bill Delaney's Free Ride (1977). Free Ride (1977) featuring cinematography from Dan Merkel expressed the new spirit of pro-surfing and a move away from counterculture values. Surf stars such as Nat Young who had turned their backs on competition were replaced by the younger 'Free Ride' generation led by Wayne 'Rabbit Bartholomew, Peter Townend and Ian Cairns (see below). The remainder of this chapter analyses in more detail the values in surfing in the twenty five year period 1955-1980 particularly issues of masculinity and authenticity in the stars and the rhetoric about waves<sup>4</sup>. As Horrocks (1995), Kimmel (2006) and Wheaton (2000b) point out, masculinity is not a fixed state and can change in different eras and cultures. The construction of masculinity is identified in each of these eras, specifically in how surfers construct masculinity. In this I use an approach similar to Altman and Kises, identifying the binaries implicit in the texts before the conclusion which compares the relationships between the themes expressed in the three films.

### **Surfing Hollow Days (1961) – kings of the wild frontier**

Surfing Hollow Days, Bruce Brown's fourth film, was produced at a time when surfing and Californian culture was undergoing rapid expansion. Surfing profited through technology and a burgeoning youth market in this era and these elements of Californian culture were crucial in the developing surf craze from the late sixties (May, 2002). A second issue of cultural importance to the perception of surfing in mainstream America was that it was a masculine sport in a time when masculinity was perceived as in crisis, an issue discussed previously (Ormrod: 2002). After the Second World War, gender roles were essentialised; men were the breadwinners of the family, they were supposed to be aggressive and sexually predatory. However, this was a role that was almost impossible to live up to. An article in Look (1958)

complains that, "...he (American man) is no longer the masculine, strong-minded man who pioneered the continent and built America's greatness" (Cohan, 1995 : p. 48). The notion of the American frontiersman who shaped civilization out of wilderness and produced good from manual labour had given way to 'soft' breadwinners, admen and marketing men who produced nothing more than concepts (Kimmel 2006; Cohan 1997). As men who encountered nature in the raw, and who pioneered and conquered new waves, surfers in this era could arguably be regarded as kings of the new frontier. Indeed, they were referred to in this way in an article in Saturday Evening Post of 1958 which proposed that surfing was, "...the last frontier. Civilisation drops behind [the surfers] when they leave the shore and the beauty and challenge of the great oceans is all around them" (quoted in May, 1999: p. 137).

Surfing Hollow Days, like earlier surf films, consisted of a series of surf trips around California, Australia, Hawaii and New Zealand. These are interspersed with comedy sequences making fun of the new rubber suits, trying to cross the freeway, alligator attacks and pseudo surfers, surfers who attempted to cash in on the surf craze without getting their hair wet. Brown emphasizes the joy of surfing with friends as 'the most joyous times you'll ever have'. The film features this fraternal bonding in sessions featuring Robert August, Mike Hynson, Paul Witzig, Kemp Aaberg, Mickey Dora, who all know and surf with each other. Surfers are depicted as willing to face danger and injury in their efforts to ride the perfect wave: taking off at Sunset, Hawaii, for instance, is like "stepping in an open elevator shaft", but even twelve years old Peter Johnson ("four feet two inches weighing eighty lbs...on a surfboard eight and a half feet long") is willing to have a go. However, the star of the film is Phil Edwards. Brown returns to Edwards as a surfing star in most of the segments. He is at pains to emphasise Edwards abilities claiming that within the surfing fraternity, Edwards is regarded as the, "the top surfer in the world today", the, "classiest surfer in the world". In his descriptions of surf trips Brown notes how at Byron Bay, Australia Edwards rides "just like he was nailed to the

board”, in South California he is able to “surf any wave”, he adopts the “same casual style and stance even in Sunset Beach [Hawaii]” and in the way he trims the board at Makaha Beach he demonstrates his expertise against other surfers by overtaking them on the wave. Edwards also exhibits courage, extending the frontiers of surfing by being the first to surf the Pipeline. The coral underneath this wave is ‘like railway spikes’ and although at first Edwards decides it is too dangerous, he is seduced by the ‘big hollow wave’ the next day. He is, according to Brown, the first to ride this now famous and infamous wave which Brown notes, “takes a lot of nerve and a lot of skill”.

Thus Edwards et al represent the authentic surfer personality: naturally gifted, brave and committed to extending surfing’s frontiers in surfing unknown waves. Edward’s attitude to danger is also replicated by other surfers in the film who take wipeouts and injury. They also face the possibility of shark attack. At Rincorn Point, Santa Barbara, for instance, a shark is shown in the break next to a surfer, and at Bondi Beach, “if the sharks don’t get you the swordfish will”. Not content with putting their bodies at risk in the water, the surfers in the film also take part in other adventure sports such as scuba diving in the Florida Everglades, freeboarding (an early form of wakeboarding) in Australia and skiing an eighteen mile descent down the Tasmin Glacier, New Zealand. In their encounters with danger they straddle the boundaries of life and death and may be regarded as edgeworkers, putting their lives in peril for a cathartic encounter with nature in the raw (Lyng, 1990). Thus surfers represent the essential masculine qualities of the late fifties early sixties in their encounters with the wilderness and their courage.

The surfer do-it-yourself ethic also signals their difference from the ‘soft breadwinner’. Rather than producing concepts in their imagination, they produce surfboards with their hands. A few of the surfers shown, Hobie Alter and Gordon Clark produce foam blanks or shape surfboards. This DIY ethic is not isolated in America, for the surfers in New Zealand seriously hampered

by bans on imported foam. Therefore they produce surfboards in an old greenhouse using whatever materials are to hand. To emphasise hard masculinity in Australia, Brown also features a SLSAA Carnival. He depicts the militaristic 'pass and review' with Scottish bagpipers adding to the ceremony. The importance of this display is shown in the television coverage of the surf lifesavers carrying the flags and equipment, the sheer weight of the surf boats in the races where "it is chicken to look over your shoulders". The unruly surf establishes the strength and endurance of the surf lifesavers.

A sequence near the end of the film encapsulates what it is to be a surfer in this era through its juxtaposition with the inauthentic, the 'pseudo surfer'. Brown describes how the pseudo surfer's board is never taken out of the car and in some cases is bolted to the roof. He illustrates this in a comedy sequence in which John Herbson, who keeps half a surfboard sticking out of the end of his car, is 'too old', and is therefore rejected by the Malibu surfers. Herbson counters this by buying into the culture with a "how to be a surfer kit". This includes peroxide so he can get 'bushy, bushy, blonde hair', baggies, a dictionary of swear words, fake tan and surf bumps which emulate the knocks taken by surfers, but without the pain. The pseudo surfer is juxtaposed with the authentic surfer, Phil Edwards, described by The negative aspects of the pseudo surfer emphasise authenticity through the negative pseudo surfer. As discussed above, the surfer demonstrates ability, courage and his is a youthful, frontier spirit. In short, he is a 'real' man. From the mid sixties, masculinity changed dramatically with the influence of hippie countercultural values. The unthinkable happened, poetry and romantic stories appeared in surf magazines and, as discussed above, surf film makers adopted avant garde film techniques. These were all crucial components of The Crystal Voyager (1973).

### **The Crystal Voyager (1973) – brothers on a beautiful wave**

Where Brown stressed the dangers inherent in surfing, *Stranger* (1999) proposes that some surf media aestheticises the wave and therefore diminishes the threat of risk. He makes special



mention of some of the soul surfing films in his discussion, which, as discussed above, adopted countercultural values. According to Brake (1990) countercultural values stress movement on both the physical and spiritual plane: physical in the nomadic lifestyle, and spiritual through the use of mind-expanding drugs. In surfing this notion of movement was expressed in three ways; by physical movement, in the quest for the perfect waves, in spiritual movement through drug use and an evocation of the altered state in surfing the tube.

The Crystal Voyager (1973) is a biography of Santa Barbara surf guru and kneeboarder, George Greenough. Greenough and Bob McTavish, an Australian shaper, were significant movers in the development of the shortboard which enabled surfers to interact with the ocean in an entirely different way to longboards. Greenough's fin design enabled surfers greater board manoeuvrability, and in Crystal Voyager Greenough is shown shaping and crafting a short board, and spraying a fin of his own design, inspired by the yellow tuna. Greenough is portrayed as sensitive, eccentric and creative, a hobo, who appears to exist on very little money or material goods. He can fashion any tool or equipment out of spare parts. For instance, Young notes that when the house Greenough shared with some surfing friends at Alexandra Head in Queensland was too cold:

...George set to work to ease the situation. He first cut a hole in the iron roof through which he ran a whopping great piece of pipe to make a chimney. The bottom of the pipe he attached to a tin washbasin which was sat in a second washbasin half filled with sand, forming a fireplace that kept the house warm all winter. (Young, 1998: p. 115)

Throughout the film Greenough is represented as having turned his back on materialism in order to recycle to save the earth. For instance, he spends much time creating a boat from which he can surf unknown waves. Unlike early surfing films, The Crystal Voyager does not

have comedy wipeouts and sequences, nor does it add extra footage, as did Browne, Witzig and other film producers. It is a finished product with a cyclical narrative. It tells of a three month period in Greenough's life, it begins by discussing tube rides and finishes with a tube ride.

As noted above, Greenough was instrumental in the development of shortboard technology so necessary to tube riding. Indeed, whilst shaping a board in Crystal Voyager, Greenough notes, "The surfboards in the early sixties were just crude lumps that provided water stability but were difficult to manoeuvre". From the mid sixties riding the tube acquired spiritual meaning for surfers and tube sequences became an integral part of soul surfing films. This is represented throughout the narrative of The Crystal Voyager.

The film opens with Greenough describing tube riding in voice over, as he travels down a public highway. Greenough opens a barrier and enters a restricted road at Rincorn Point, California. The camera dwells on the signs, designed to deter the general public from entering, "No Trespassers. Armed Guardsmen and/or Patrol Cars on Duty. Private Roads and Property. Unauthorised Cars Towed Away". These signs could also be regarded as a metaphor for the tube ride. The tube was off limits to all but a small proportion of surfers who were competent enough to enter and exit without injury. The climax of the film features an extended twenty-three minute segment, 'Echoes' directed by Greenough. In this sequence, Greenough strapped a 22 lbs camera to his shoulder provides an "authentic" tubular experience for surfer and non surfer audiences.

Although much of surf rhetoric was predicated on friendship and a fraternal bonding, in this era some significant cracks were beginning to appear in surfing. As noted above, there was conflict between American and Australian surfers. There was also controversy about surf styles, a controversy to which Greenough was no stranger. In the early 70s shortboards, longboards and kneeboard riders vied for the waves, their conflict often coming to blows in 'surf rage'. Kneeboarders in particular came in for much flack being dubbed 'goons' and

'cripples' by surfboard riders. There is evidence, too that Greenough, a kneeboarder, was a victim of surf rage when he states 'Some people such as Nat [Young] have no difficulty in establishing their position on the wave.' This infers that others, such as himself, do have problems. An article by John Romano, "Kneeriders and Board Surfers. Someday Brothers" in Surfer Magazine confirms the rivalry between board riders and kneeriders for the waves asserting: "It is no secret that board riders credit themselves with superiority over anyone who does less than stand up while riding the waves... We...[board riders and knee riders]...must try to surf together, or we create a small Vietnam in Mother Ocean" (Romano, 1968: p.37). The Crystal Voyager could arguably be regarded as an attempt to resolve differences within the surfing community - the film as it was jointly funded by Australia and America and the narrative continuously refers to friendship and the surfing fraternity through its depictions of surf trips and in the soundtrack lyrics . On the national level, it was produced as a joint venture between the Australian Film Development Corporation and the U.S. Travel Service. Australians Dave Elphick and Albie Falzon directed the documentary section and Greenough, an American directed the end sequence. The friendship between American surfers, Greenough and West, and Australian surfer, Nat Young served a double purpose as it purported to heal national differences, but also differences in the surfing community between riders of different types of surfboards. As in the Romano article, Vietnam was invoked as a plea for tolerance in the lyrics of "Song of Change", written by Wayne Thomas, "I've heard the crying/Of the dead and the dying/I've heard the thunder/ From way over yonder/ And I've asked myself a million times/ what's the reason/It seems to me that death is never out of season" . In keeping with its hippie values, the song proposed that surfing could be the a solution for the problems of modern existence such as 'greed and ambition', loss of freewill and taking, not giving in life. "Song of Changes" occurs at two key points in the narrative: at the beginning when Greenough travels from the public highway into Rincorn Point, and at the beginning of the quest for the

perfect wave after the completion of the sailboat, Morning Light, and a shoot for a Hollywood production. Both of these incidents are transition points in the narrative, in the former from the public to the private domain by means of a keycard; in the latter from the material world of Hollywood and the earth into what Greenough describes as “the eternal realm of the ocean” in which, “sun, moon, wind, sea...govern our new life”.

The ‘Echoes’ sequence may be regarded as the culmination of the quest for the perfect wave. The sequence consists of pulsating shapes and colours – mainly blues and greens, ending in sunrise. It is clear that in ‘Echoes’ Greenough wishes to convey the psychotropic effect of riding the tube to his audiences both in the imagery and the soundtrack. This effect is emphasised by the use of Pink Floyd’s extended musical sequence, ‘Echoes’ from the Meddle album. Pink Floyd more than any other rock group of the early 1970s epitomised psychedelia. Reynolds and Press (1995) note that ‘Echoes’:

...combines two kinds of nostalgic sorrow – one for the immediate past [the Summer of Love] and the other for wombadelic bliss. The moment has past when the counterculture looked like it could build a life without alienation, overturn the Oedipal complex en masse. Collective transcendence of the reality-principle has degenerated, with the atomisation of the hippie community, into a life-defying flight from reality. (Reynolds and Press, 1995: p.190)

The ‘new life’, therefore, turns its back on the harsh reality of life towards a psychotropic, fantasy lifestyle where the perfect wave can last forever.

### **Free Ride (1976) – competition and the urban aesthetic**

By the mid 1970s soul surfing was overtaken by a new, urban aggressive surf style which resulted from Australian surfers attempting to promote professionalism (Booth 2003). The Australian sporting tradition was founded on British sporting conventions and the colonial experience. Cashman (1995) notes that Australian sport was based upon and restricted by the

British amateur sporting tradition until the mid twentieth century. A growing nationalism in the 1970s however, led to the election of the Whitlam government. The Whitlam government aimed at developing the sports infrastructure in Australia. Funding was offered to athletes to travel and to develop rules and competition standards and, as noted above, some Australian surfers lost little time in establishing a pro circuit and marketing their pro status.

An example of this new attitude in surfing can be seen in the Bronzed Aussies who were the brainchild of Mike Hurst, a journalist, track and field athletic star. Hurst took up surfing for the first time in 1976 and was surprised to discover that promotion was virtually unknown in the sport. The rationale for the Bronzed Aussies was that as a team they would make more money and therefore be able to surf more. They would maintain a higher media profile and should one fall sick or be injured sponsorship deals would not fall through as his place would be taken by another team member. The Bronzed Aussies soon contrived a high media profile with their contentious comments, a pilot television show and numerous sponsorship deals. Peter Townend, who prior to the Bronzed Aussies had earned \$60 per week as a retainer from Gordon and Smith reasoned: "If you've got a guy working his arse off for you, you should pay him accordingly. You don't keep him on a pittance, you give him an incentive. Free surfboards and things like that it's just not enough" (Jarratt, 1977: p.13). All of these factors result in Australian culture's more practical and bullish attitude to sport and surfing. The binaries evoked between punk/ hippie link into notions of urban/ rural, working/ middle class and all ultimately become part of the pro/amateur ethos (Booth 2003).

In mainstream surfing this was expressed in the growing ascendancy of competitive values and the emergence of pro-surfers whose values were expressed in Bill Delaney's Free Ride (1977). Professional surfing is promoted in a number of ways from the notion of surfing hero to the depiction of the pro surfer lifestyle. The opening sequence of Free Ride consists of a montage of shots juxtaposing underwater sequences in which the surfboard, planes through the water

like some ominous shark. Wayne 'Rabbit' Bartholomew surfs towards the camera in an aggressive, in-your-face-stance. It is through shots like the opening sequence that Free Ride, articulates the changing surf values. Gone is Greenough's point of view shot taking the audience into the tube in order to illustrate why surfers must not war against each other. These surfers are not hippies – they are aggressive, young and aim to make a name for themselves. The board is not a vehicle to link the spiritual and material plane, rather, it is a weapon, a phallus, signifying power and the carving up, shredding and ripping the wave (Booth 2003). The film proposes that only certain surfers have the endurance and dedication to become pro surfers. This point is continuously stressed throughout the film as is the notion of this new type of surfer as hero. The younger 'Free Ride' generation were led by Wayne 'Rabbit' Bartholomew, Peter Townend and Ian Cairns. Thoms notes that, "Though not initially conceived as such, it [Free Ride] proved a showpiece for professional surfing, covering a number of contests on the pro-circuit, including the 1976 Hawaiian events that decided the World Championship" (Thoms 2000:136). Much of the cinematography was produced by Dan Merkel, a staff photographer of Surfing magazine to shoot the close up water sequences. Merkel used a 22lbs camera in a special housing designed by George Greenough to shoot his footage, sometimes, underwater. One reviewer noted Merkel's, "'in-the-tube" footage is so exceptional that it represents a giant leap forward in the genre [and] leaves George Greenough's pioneering sequences in The Inner Limits of Pure Fun and Crystal Voyager way back in the stone age" (Quoted in Thoms 2000: 136). The importance of the 'in-the-tube footage' is crucial as it recorded the radical performance of Shaun Thomson, who was carving a name for himself in tube riding.

The first part of the film explores surfing in the context of the professional surf lifestyle. The film's 'stars', Bartholomew and Thomson provide their philosophy of surfing. Various surfing hot spots are highlighted, Indonesia, California, Victoria and Queensland Australia, each with

its own distinctive brand of waves and surfing performance. The locations are more city-centred than in soul surfing films attesting to the new urbanised punk spirit of surfing. Part two chronicles the pro-circuit tour of Hawaii in 1976, showing the various waves of the North Shore, the Smirnoff Pro Am, Sunset Beach, culminating in the most mythic wave of all, the Pipeline.

Bartholomew is depicted as a surf mongrel, coming from a deprived background. His parents divorced at an early age and his father did not provide maintenance to his mother. Therefore, Bartholomew made money in whatever way he could, playing pool, doing a newspaper round and ‘hustling’ (Bartholomew and Baker, 1996: p. 21). Bartholomew’s poor background is a good preparation for the pro surfer lifestyle which involves hustling, surviving and making money in what ever way is possible. For instance, Bartholomew records how he and Ian Cairns would survive in Hawaii on the five dollar buffet, eating as much as they could so that they did not have to eat until the next day. In Free Ride he notes people regard him as, ‘...some sort of hustler in the water...take a lot of waves as I’m never satisfied to sit out there waiting for fifteen minutes...most of the time I think I surf really casually, really artfully’. Bartholomew attempts to position his surfing as art but the notion of Bartholomew as a hustler is further reinforced in the sequence showing him playing football. Here he acts as an individual, keeping the ball to himself rather than acting as part of the team. This is within the spirit of the surf hero as surfing is a sport which encourages individuality. Like his football, his surfing is all dazzle and display. Therefore the romance of soul surfing is inappropriate to Bartholomew’s experience and star image described as, “David Bowie meets Mohammed Ali – pure rock-and-roll flash...” (Borte, 2000). In Free Ride Bartholomew reinforces his position as a radical and aggressive surfer by admitting that he does not see himself as a ‘slasher, slicer and attacker’ inferring that some people do see him in this way. Bartholomew’s competitive spirit is however demonstrated by his tactics in psyching out his opponents before a contest.

For instance he raised his profile in winning the eating competition prior to the 1976 Bells event:

I realised by drawing attention to myself before the event I was not only psyching out some of my opposition, I was also being watched more closely by the judges. It was all part of the proud Australian surfing tradition of pulling radical stunts before a contest. (Bartholomew and Baker, 1996: p.143)

In this statement Bartholomew at once pins his national and masculine banners to the mast. The testing of the male body through danger and risk is foregrounded in voice over narration, 'You don't know how far you can turn until you spin out. You don't know how high you can go until you can't get back down. You don't know how deep you can ride until you can't get back out, [this is narrated over a wipeout] Surfing progresses when surfers successfully go beyond these limits.' This voice-over articulates the concerns of the film, the notion that progress can only be achieved if the limits are pushed and risks are taken. Only the surfer willing to face dangers and test conditions will be able to push back the boundaries of surfing. The 'just do it mentality' is supreme, predicated not upon aesthetics but the ascetic body, toned, trained and pushed to its limits (Donnelly 1988; Stranger 1999; Wheaton 2000a). Moreover, this is a body which epitomises essential masculine qualities, from 'significant others' endorsement. Fred Hemmings notes of Tomson that he is capable of becoming 'the super stud of the sports world.' Michael Peterson, the world surfing champion attests to the courage of Wayne Bartholomew: 'He's forever putting himself in the really radical spots [so he can] pull off really radical moves and really smooth things on any part of the wave.'

Bartholomew and Tomson show their dedication to surfing in everything they do, including time off the waves. The film follows them around into surf shops where they discuss the merits



of the various surfboards and equipment. They ‘play’ at skateboarding in the streets and practice surf moves on playground equipment. The dedication and courage of Bartholomew and Thomson are also evident in their dialogue. Thomson, describing his aims in tube riding where: “I’ve tried to break that straight line trim and managed because that’s what surfing’s about...manoeuvres, not just standing there posing”. Bartholomew tells a story about his ride on a ‘mellow hot dog wave’ in Indonesia. In these waters sea snakes swim around in packs but there is also an added danger, the coral below the wave. Like Brown’s hyperbole when describing the coral under the Pipeline, in Surfing Hollow Days, Bartholomew asserts if the surfer does not get out of the tube his leg will be skinned. The rhetoric here is harsh and emphasises Bartholomew’s courage. However, unlike the earlier film where the surfer does not speak, Bartholomew pleads his own case. Other traces of earlier surf values also recur in Bartholomew’s rhetoric. Despite his competitive spirit, Bartholomew, has an aesthetic vision of surfing. In his autobiography he likens surfing to dancing and therefore akin to art, “I saw myself as a dancer on the waves, and I worked constantly on improving my routine, fitness and flexibility” (Bartholomew and Baker, 1996: p. 61). This is reflected in Jan Michael Vincent’s opening voice over which refers to surfing as artform. Although he considers surfing as a form of dance Bartholomew also approaches the sport with the work ethic. This involves striving to be better than his opponent by performance but also studying his moves.

Free Ride mythologizes the representation of the surfer as hero. However, Free Ride rhetoric moves away from the surfer as everyman towards the elite surfer, the surfer who is best at what he does, who can win competitions, and who makes a living out of surfing. The professional surfer is positioned as special, at the top of the evolutionary chain, a mythic embodiment of the Nietzschean ubermensch. Like the ubermensch, the prosurfer is aligned with nature, a ‘higher type’ whose natural superiority and commitment enables him to rise above the everyday surfer and who, has the right to implement his dream (Nietzsche, 2005). However, this natural

superiority is not predicated upon class. Although the archetypal hero is of noble birth (Hourihan, 1997), the Free Ride generation hero is egalitarian, special by dint of his talent, dedication and sometimes his cunning as a strategist and star performer.

In a subculture such as surfing, in which authenticity is predicated on ability to do rather than just perform identity, the generic study of surf films demonstrates Booth's argument that the promotion of values such as adventure and hedonism have a significant effect on identities. Of necessity, Booth gave a general overview of the development of surfing on film as this had not been analysed at that point. The aim of this chapter has been to extend Booth's original article by analysing three significant films which epitomise the values of their eras.

### **Conclusions**

What makes a 'real' surfer? From this analysis of the different eras of surfing it is possible to trace some common features that confer authenticity on the surfer: dedication to the surfer lifestyle, masculinity envisaged through friendship and fraternal bonding, the encounter between man and nature and the DIY ethic. However, this means different things in different eras and these changes in surfing and surfer audience values are reflected in the films. In the fifties and sixties it is an image of fun, laddish behaviour such as getting a free wash in a carwash with cars, but conformity. Brown's scathing comments on the ill repute visited on surfing due to the loutish pseudo surfer behaviour on the beach, echoes John Severson's editorial in Surfer, calling for better behaviour from surfers. It is also courage and the frontiersman spirit; the courage to surf unknown waves despite the sharp coral running underneath. In the soul surfing era it is commitment to a surfing lifestyle that turns its back on the rat race and lives a Bohemian lifestyle. However, soul surfers also quest to discover unknown waves. This theme is taken up in Free Ride where, although Bartholomew and Tomson espouse values in direct opposition to soul surfing's anti-contest ethic, their commitment to surfing and the developing competition circuit is total. It leads them to a life of

frugality, eating contests as a means of feeding oneself and constant honing of their surf skills. Indeed, in all three films, there is a feeling that the time spent on land fills time before the next surfing session.

Masculinity and heroism is also strongly suggested in the films. In all three surfers prepare to risk injury to surf. In the different eras, notions of masculinity change. These changes may be demonstrated in a comparison of the stars of Crystal Voyager and Free Ride, George Greenough and Wayne “Rabbit” Bartholomew. Despite Greenough’s hippie, Bohemian lifestyle, like many countercultural participants, he comes from a middle class, affluent background (Clarke et al). Yet he chooses to live simply. Nevertheless, he owns houses in Santa Barbara, California and Noosa Point, Australia. Conversely, in Free Ride Bartholomew and Thomson are shown living frugally on the pro-surfing circuit, although this is less by choice than necessity as the primitive pro circuit at this time did not enable surfers to live a comfortable lifestyle. Authenticity is predicated on ability, the just do it mentality of act now and worry later (Wheaton and Beal, 2003). Surfers’ abilities in these films are further confirmed by peer praise; Edwards is lauded by surfers all over the world; Bartholomew and Thomson are praised by Hemmings and Townend.

Booth notes against the temptation of making general assumptions about historic events, “Films invariably offer audiences multiple, inconsistent, and contradictory images” (Booth 1996: p. 320). Although authenticity changes in each era, traces of the previous era are found in the films’ rhetoric. In Free Ride, for instance, there are traces of soul surfing’s aesthetic sensibilities when Rabbit Bartholomew claims his surfing is art. The dedication exhibited by pro surfers is aimed at being able to live to surf as much as surf to live; they make money so they can enjoy a surfing lifestyle. Further, a totalising picture cannot explain the individual responses to the representations in surf films. One cannot describe surfing in the late sixties and early seventies as awash with drugs purely because surf films evoked “...stoked paeans of

organic bliss and tubular escape” (Kampion, 1998: p. 112). Certainly these values may have been encoded in the texts. However, as Hall notes, audiences’ decoding of the films may have adopted varying positions. This accords with issues raised in my research into British surfing in which surfers suggested that although certain values and ideals such as hedonism and the romance of the wave were encoded in surf films, the decoding was dependent upon recognition, individual surfer values and local conditions. (Ormrod, 2008) So although one may analyse the representations in the films in a specific manner, I would agree with Booth that caution must be used in claiming that every surfer in this era was a soul surfer, or that every surfer in the late seventies suddenly became interested in competition and pro surfing. There is much evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of the surfing population was, and continues to be sceptical of competition and surfing for anything more than fun or adventure. Nevertheless, this overview of the development of generic iconography, narratives, production and audience responses to “pure”surf films has wider implications in the study of subcultural development and the research into film genres and their effects in wider culture. Booth notes surf films can tell us much about surf history, but they impacted on surfing over and beyond merely reflecting surf values. Neale (2000) argues that genres not only reflect socio cultural concerns, they also shape values and “influence and reinforce social conditions”, (Thwaites, T. et al., 1994: p. 100). Nowhere is this more evident than in a discussion of surf films. Surf films were produced by surfers who were influential in the subculture. Charismatic individuals who either starred in the films, produced them or wrote and published surf magazines. They not only articulated and represented the cutting edge of surfing and surf technology, they promoted new values and ideas and, although I have indicated these were not always adopted with enthusiasm, they still retain an impact on contemporary surf culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Audience behaviours in surf film screenings are discussed at length by Beattie (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Jaggard (1997; Jaggard 2006) contests this and argues that the SLSAA did promote experiment in surfboard technology. However there is not enough space to discuss this here.

<sup>4</sup> Although The Endless Summer (1966) is generally regarded as the definitive surf film it is not analysed here as it has been discussed in depth elsewhere (Ormrod 2008).