



Radical delirium : surf film and video and the documentary mode

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PART III: THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE BEACH

CHAPTER 7

Radical Delirium: Surf Film, Video and the Documentary Mode

KEITH BEATTIE

Introduction

The spread of surfing as a sport and a lifestyle along Australia's beaches in the 1960s was complemented and extended by the rise of non-fictional filmic presentations of surfing practices and surfing culture. According to one commentator, such representations have constituted "the most significant ... development" in the history of Australian film production (Thoms, 1978, p. 89). Various features of the surf film industry have been quoted in support of such a claim. Local producers of surf film were, it was argued, "the only ones to have created an independent, vertically integrated film economy to control production, distribution and exhibition" (Thoms, 1978, p. 85). The predominant form of exhibition of early surf film – in local halls or under-utilized cinemas, often with the filmmaker present to provide an introduction or accompanying voice-over – "helped to break down assumptions about exhibition and audiences that had dominated the trade for decades" (Pike and Cooper, 1980, p. 307). In another way, features of the surf film industry have been linked to output, as in the claim that Bob Evans, a pioneer of Australian surf documentaries, "was (Australia's) most prolific film-maker in the 1960s" (Jarratt, 1977, p.44). Patterns of production, exhibition and reception inform the distinctive textual features of surf film and surf video which, in contrast to other forms of filmmaking in Australia, have not been noted or analysed. Redressing this omission is facilitated through the recognition that the significance of 'surf movies' resides, primarily, in the fact that such texts meld documentary and experimental stylistics and practices in an expressive and innovative non-fictional form.

The meeting of avant-garde and documentary practices is, however, a proposition which threatens the resultant text with abandonment to the edges of film theory. Television theorist John Caldwell, for example, wrote of the "generic no-man's land" which is produced by the meeting (Caldwell, 1995, p. 239). Indeed, while film history contains a number of

examples of texts in which the documentary and avant-garde modes intersect, frequently such examples illustrate the problematic and conflicted nature of the intersection. One example, from the early 1960s, demonstrates the difficulties for theoretical understandings and filmmaking practice posed by such a confluence. In 1963 Jonas Mekas, polemicist and practitioner of New York underground filmmaking, together with a number of his colleagues, visited, uninvited, the annual Flaherty documentary film seminar in Brattleboro, Vermont. Mekas brought with him Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) and Ken Jacob's *Blonde Cobra* (1963) to screen at the conference, which that year was dedicated to an analysis of works of cinema verite. The meeting of two traditions – the avant-garde, represented by Mekas and other members of the Film-Makers' Co-op, and the films they intended to screen – and documentary – represented by the seminar – was not a happy one, and Mekas and his associates were refused entry to the seminar.¹ What has been called the “two, nonexclusive tendencies (documentary and the avant-garde)” (Nichols, 1998, p. 4) has, as the events at Brattleboro illustrate, been rigorously separated in practice into two strands. Such a division has been reinforced within and through documentary film theory which has determined that texts such as those Mekas proposed to screen are outside the realms of documentary.

This position is rendered ironic when it is considered that *Flaming Creatures*, one of the films Mekas took to Brattleboro, is an effective documentary representation of a particular subculture. As film historian Marc Siegal has pointed out, “(a)ssertions about the documentary nature of (certain) films irritated Mekas and other critics who valued underground film for its aesthetic innovation”. However, ‘by legitimating underground films solely on aesthetic terms, these critics avoided a consideration of how aesthetic innovation can be integrally related’ to documenting ‘particular (sexual) subcultures’. In Siegal’s analysis, *Flaming Creatures* is an avant-gardist documentary, one that has been denied the status of documentary – “a documentary which dare not speak its name” (Siegal, 1997, pp. 92-93).

Similarly, surf film and surf video texts which meld documentary and experimental or avant-garde characteristics – have been excluded from the documentary canon and receive scant, if any, attention within (documentary) film theory. The following examination recognises that the textual strategies and production and exhibition practices of independent surf texts pose a challenge to the assumptions that inform documentary theory and the canon of texts it supports and reinforces. I argue that the stylistic innovations characteristic of certain so-called pure surf films of the late 1960s – notably *The Innermost Limits of Pure Fun* (1970), *Morning of the*

Earth (1972), and *Crystal Voyager* (1973) – and various contemporary independent surf video productions, force a reconsideration of documentary film and in so doing enlarge the approaches and positions that serve as the foundations of documentary film theory.

Discourse of Delirium

The term avant-garde is used here to refer to experimental or innovative filmic styles and formal practices. As it is applied within this analysis the term is not necessarily linked to the traditions of the two avant-gardes identified by Wollen, the formal and the theoretical-political, though it does derive aspects of its meaning from certain features examined by Wollen (Wollen, 1982). In this way, the surf film *Morning of the Earth*, for example, borrows from, on the one hand, the formal innovations wrought by the New American Cinema and, on the other, from a lineage of poetic and imagistic avant-garde documentary film. Similarly, the primitivist stylistics of independently produced non-fiction surf videos are largely intelligible through reference to the textual practices of varieties of “underground” film and video. Both surf film and surf video in their respective representations of lifestyles that transgress or offer alternatives to accepted social and political practices invoke the political component of the avant-garde noted by Wollen. Indeed, the documentation of ‘alternatives’ is a characteristic shared by surf film and surf video and avant-garde film and video works. Surf texts and avant-garde works, and their overlaps and intersections, can be contextualized within a common rhetoric of anti-traditionalism which derived much of its force from its connections to 1960s counter-cultural ideology.²

The counter-cultural context contributes a number of themes common to both surf texts and those texts produced explicitly as ‘avant-garde’ works, in particular, an emphasis on personal freedom, hedonism, and, in their shared distrust of industrial technology and its effects, various allusions to a lost pastoral ideal. The appeals in surf film to such culturally ‘radical’ characteristics finds a correlative in an emphasis within surf film and video on the documentation of surfing styles, particularly those styles which are innovative and aggressively expressive, that is, styles which were once defined by the surfing subculture as ‘radical’.

Wollen’s (1982) two avant-gardes intersect with the two ‘radicalisms’ outlined here – cultural radicalism and innovative surfing styles and manoeuvres – in surf texts which deploy a documentary mode that is not obsessed with truth or knowledge claims. Nevertheless, surf texts, like other

documentaries, confirm "the knowableness in general of the world" (Cowie, 1999, p. 27) and assert, as with all non-fiction discourse, that the events and actions they present "occur or occurred in the actual world" (Plantinga, 1996, p. 310). Film theorist Bill Nichols elaborated the representational claims of documentary by specifying that documentary film can be compared with other non-fictional systems of representation which together

make up what we may call the discourse of sobriety. Science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare...(t)heir discourse has an air of sobriety...Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. (Nichols, 1991, p. 3)

Further, and importantly, such discourses deploy textual strategies of representation which frame subjects in ways which are solemn in tone and frequently in content, and which, largely, reject aesthetic innovation. "Not a lot of laughs" is Brian Winston's characterisation of most documentary practice (Winston, 1998, p. 145).

Grierson's (1979) early definition of documentary is a 'creative treatment of actuality' held the potential, with its possibility of an emphasis on 'creative', to inaugurate a strand of documentary which admitted experimental styles and forms and with them a 'radical' tone capable of revising sobriety. This potential was denied in his later positions in which he claimed that documentary was an "anti-aesthetic movement" (p.112) dedicated not to formal innovation but to what others have since characterised as the earnest representation of social problems. As Winston (1995), in particular, has argued, the legacy of the canonisation and institutionalisation of the sober tone and didactic stance of the Griersonian documentary discourse has been a denial of alternative forms and traditions of visual documentary.

In order that documentary film theory recognise and admit the full range of practices, forms and traditions which comprise documentary enterprise it must move beyond a focus on a documentary discourse of sobriety. Recognising the need for such a move, Nichols (2000) has recently sought to identify the ways in which "documentary film theory (has) failed to comprehend the full dimensionality of those practices we may call documentary" (p. 1). Such practices include the previously marginalised and hence untheorised forms of surf film and surf video. These texts challenge and supplant the documentary discourse of sobriety with a structuring aesthetic that can be termed a discourse of delirium.

The phrase discourse of delirium, as it is applied here, is borrowed and reworked from Nichols who uses it in a discussion of the evidentiary styles of the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988). Nichols places this text, together with a number of other works, within the category of what he calls performative documentary. He interpreted performative documentary as an emergent mode which deflects 'documentary from what has been its most commonsensical purpose – the development of strategies for pervasive argumentation about the historical world'. Such a representation is a "viable mix of the expressive, poetic, and rhetorical aspects as new determinants" in which the structural emphasis on the poetic and an excessive use of style 'may relegate such films to the avant-garde" (Nichols, 1994, pp. 94-95).

For Nichols, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Pushes the features of performative documentary to their limits. Only in the last instance – through its claim on direct access to a real referent – does the text retrieve itself from being totally committed to the avant-garde. According to Nichols, the film's excessive visual style 'poses the risk of sliding toward a discourse not of sobriety, but delirium'. *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Presents the spectator with:

A fraying away of the historical event...the analytic impossibility of determining causality, internationality, or motivation from the visual record; the heightened intensity brought to bear on the isolated event itself...to yield up its secrets, its meaning. All of these factors burden the interpretation of the event with an excess that threatens to become pure delirium. (Nichols, 1996, p.59)³

The interpretative relevance to surf film and video of the evocative phrase 'discourse of delirium' is manifested through reference to certain features of the discourse, including a general lack of concern with an historical event and the eschewing of causality or motivation. The threat of an aesthetic 'pure delirium', a 'flailing, wild hysteria' is, in a positive and non-derogatory sense, achieved in the aesthetic tensions and accomplishments of surf film and surf video.

The documentary representation of the world, which is an integral feature of the discourse of delirium, is extended and informed within an emphasis on spectacle evident in surf texts. Spectacle, a variety of representation normally associated with fiction film, though recently film scholars have detailed its presence in early non-fiction film⁴ is at the very least...a feast for the eyes'. The subject of spectacle "is viewed not for knowledge, but for sensation, which has increasingly been associated with the nonintellectual"

(Cowie, 1999, p. 25). Contemporary fictional narrative, particularly the “visceral, kinetic, and fast-paced” spectacle of the action-adventure genre (Schatz, 1993, p. 32), is maintained within the formal and narrative boundaries of the text. In contrast, the discourse of delirium involves formal excess, a “promiscuous visual surplus” to the narrative economy of the text (James, 1996, p. 216). The visually spectacular features of surf film and video are enhanced through aural elements, particularly soundtracks which replace a voice-over, a staple of the expository documentary, with varieties of contemporary music. The visual elements, together with the aural aspects, contribute to a discourse which in its documentation of events and actions, is based on sensory experience. In these ways, the ‘delirious’ melding of avant-garde and documentary styles and practices of surf film and video is characterised by, to paraphrase Nichol’s description of delirium, a heightened and frequently excessive visual and aural intensity brought to bear on the isolated action of surfing in order to reveal its secrets and meanings.

Hootin’ and Hollerin’: Delirium and Audience Reception

The audience of surf film, though primarily composed of surfers, did at times include a wider public. Common venues throughout the 1960s for the exhibition of four-walled surf films were community or church halls that comprised part of an informal chain of coastal exhibition sites during the summer months. Audiences at these venues often included holidaying families seeking an evening’s entertainment. Bruce Brown’s *The Endless Summer* (1964) received general theatrical release, and *Crystal Voyager* had a limited theatrical release in Australia and London. Such patterns of exhibition opened surf film to an audience beyond its regular primary constituency of practising surfers. However, it is within this latter audience that the powerful effects of the discourse of delirium are evident. The viewing experience for this audience suggests a text that, in its banishment of sobriety, effectively documents essential aspects of surfing and associated lifestyles in a way which establishes an intense form of identification with the text. The intensity of viewers’ identification resulted at times in rowdy, occasionally violent, behaviour.

Typical of the unrestrained reactions to the public exhibition of surf films were those responses noted by world champion surfer Nat Young who attended the screening of a surf film in Sydney in 1963:

It seemed it was almost surfer instinct to go wild over the screaming of surf guitars and the pounding of huge waves at Sunset (Beach). As in

California, the theatre proprietors and the public could not understand or tolerate this behaviour, especially when a glass mural depicting the Anzacs in battle was smashed and seats were ripped out of the auditorium: the surfers were ushered out by numerous police. (Young and McGregor, 1984, p.91)⁵

Frequently, audience reception exceeded raucous and aggressive behaviour and took a form of response similar to that of audiences of film 'event rides' in which the viewing experience becomes a physical alignment of the body and the image. Bob Condon, producer of a number of surf films, noted that the seated audience for his films responded by (throwing) their turn when the rider does...(leaning) for a bottom turn and (pushing) back in their seat for a cutback" (Flynn, 1987, p. 408).

On one level, such varieties of audience reception form part of a process of subcultural identity and community formation through an appeal to, and reinforcement of, subcultural affect and knowledges. Featherstone (1995) has noted the operations and boundaries of such a process by observing that 'strong affectual bonds' persist and are maintained when:

... people come together in constellations with fluid boundaries to experience the multiple attractions, sensations, sensibilities and vitalism of an extra-logical community which embodies a 'sense of being together ... a common feeling generated by common emotional adherence to a sign which is recognisable by others. (p. 47)

The construction of a community around and through viewing positions of surf film corresponds to processes which informed the reception of early film. A film screening in the formative days of cinema became a public event in emphatic sense and a collective horizon in which industrially processed experience could be reappropriated by the experiencing subjects. Within this process the problems posed by (early) cinema's availability to "...socially unruly audiences in turn prompted the elaboration of classical modes of narration and spectator positioning" (Hansen, 1994, p. 137). Surf films eschews classical fictional and documentary narration with the result that its 'unruly audiences' actively resist the forms of spectator positioning associated with classical (fictional and non-fictional) forms. The subjective and experiential engagement with surf film results from the replacement of classical narration with strategies derived from the documentary avant-gardist discourse of delirium. The reception of surf film points to central aspects of this discourse, in particular a form of spectacle

that impacts on and works through the senses. In this way the unruly, unrestrained, and uninhibited reception of surf film is an expression of the pleasure of the spectacular text.⁶

In contrast to the communal experience of watching a surf film in a public space, video reception is a (semi) private act of consumption that takes place primarily in the domestic sphere. Within this space viewing often takes the form of repeated screenings. In his study of participation in surfing, Mark Stranger noted that surfers in his survey “watched 10.3 *different* videos (an indeterminate number of times)” during the year. Videos were watched “repeatedly, either as whole programs or in fragmented snippets, as viewers searched for their favourite sequences or watched segments” according to whim or opportunity. According to Stranger, “despite being fragmented, these viewing patterns usually involved an intense degree of concentration” in a way that suggests an “aesthetic identity” between spectator and subject similar to that found among audiences of surf film (Stranger, 1999, p.272, emphasis in original). Further implicated in this process is the fact that repeated viewing of fragments of surf videos disrupts any sense of a continuous narrative. In this case, ‘timeshift’ (Cubitt, 1991) viewing habits reduce viewing to a fast-forward search for spectacular imagery. As with surf film, spectacle is highlighted by and foregrounded for the viewing audience of surf videos as a central element of the discourse of delirium. An analysis of selected surf films and surf videos emphasises the particular visual and aural practices and styles of the discourses of delirium. Such an analysis reveals that the melding of documentary and avant-garde approaches in the discourse of delirium reproduces an effective and affective mode of documentary representation.

A New Wave: Surf Film

The final scene of Julian Schnabel’s *Basquiat* (1996), a portrait of the artist Jean Michel Basquiat, depicts the artist frozen in place on a New York street as he looks to the skyline at an enormous wave poised to encroach upon the city. The tsunami functions as a metaphor for the commercial and personal forces which will soon ‘swamp’ Basquiat and result in his death at an early age. The metaphor is extended in the understanding that the approaching wave will impact on the New York avant-garde art world, imposing its presence on that scene.

The inverse of this position – the recognition of the artistic avant-garde by members of the surf community – was posed in the techniques of a number of surf films of the late 1960s, most notably Alby Falzon’s *Morning of the*

Earth. The film proclaims its links to the avant-garde, in this case the New American Cinema, by opening with a quotation by one of the leading artists of the movement, Jonas Mekas: 'We are the measure of all things. And the beauty of our creation, of our art, is proportional to the beauty of ourselves, of our souls'.⁸ The title of the film, it has been suggested, derives from Nehru's description of Bali, one of the locations for the film (Lewis, 1998). An alternative and, given Falzon's knowledge of Mekas and his work, equally valid source are scenes Mekas filmed the day after his attempt to invade the Flaherty seminar (subsequently included in his film *Lost, Lost, Lost*, 1976). The sequence is accompanied by a voice-over by Mekas declaring that on this occasion he felt close to the earth and at one with the morning. Mekas's references to an awakening intimate his "reconciliation with the natural world and the emergence of a new day of cinema" (James, 1988, p. 112). The perception applies equally to *Morning of the Earth*, which documents surfers in the natural world (the film is devoid of imagery of industrialisation) in a form referred to as pure surf film, a term used to refer to a mode of production and a particular content. Independently produced and exhibited and shot on 8mm and later 16mm film, pure surf films documented wave riding styles and trends, the evolution of surfboard design, and the lifestyles of 'soul surfers' who eschewed the competitive ethos of the rising professional surfing circuit as part of their search for alternatives to aspects of capitalist culture.⁹

Made with the assistance of a loan of \$20,000 from the newly established Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC), it was expected that *Morning of the Earth* would be profitable: in fact, the AFDC used the prospect of commercial success as the prime criterion in deciding to support a project. Though the film did prove to be popular, its market prospects were not necessarily "safe", as Dermody and Jacka (1987) claimed (p. 75). The commercial success of surf films was far from assured. In its innovations, *Morning of the Earth* ran the risk of alienating an audience accustomed to certain styles and content. The film's success attests, in part, to its ability to effectively represent the emergent soul surfing lifestyle in a 'psychedelic' style that resonated with the content: that is, in ways which emphasize the fusion of avant-gardist and documentary techniques characteristic of the discourse of delirium. While replicating the travelogue ('surfari') format of a number of earlier surf films, *Morning of the Earth* ignores a number of conventions already firmly established in the surf film tradition, including hackneyed big wave sequences, and multiple scenes of wipeouts (frequently reproduced with a puerile comedic voice-over since transferred to the 'Funniest Home Video' genre). Further, the film, unlike travelogue documentaries, avoids use of a voice-over, replacing it with a music soundtrack that serves to integrate the episodic narrative.¹⁰

In its incorporation of multiple innovations in form and content, *Morning of the Earth* sets a new standard for documentary surf films. Within its representation of communal, 'back to earth' lifestyles, indulgence of soft drugs, and an abandonment of commercialism. *Morning of the Earth* explores many themes prominent in underground film which "emancipated itself from Hollywood by reproducing in the filmic the properties of the aberrant or proscribed...practices that preoccupied the profilmic" (James, 1996, p. 216).¹¹ The connections to underground film are extended stylistically in the film. The opening imagery of a sunrise shot with infra-red photography informs a work which includes a variety of optical effects, including lap dissolves which, as Albie Thoms (1978) pointed out, "convey the simultaneous awareness that is necessary for a surfer's survival" – parallel cutting – which "reveals the significance of specific aspects of surfboard shaping to the eventual performance in the water" – and slow-motion filming further slowed in the printing of the film (p. 128). The result of the deployment of a range of visual effects is a spectacular representation "capable of revealing truths about life that we otherwise overlook or take for granted" (Thoms, 1978, p. 125). The revelation of truth, and the stylistics which relate *Morning of the Earth* to the concerns and practices of underground and experimental cinema, intersect in a delirious discourse of formal excess and documentary realism.

Like *Morning of the Earth*, George Greenough's film *The Innermost Limits of Pure Fun*, which was lauded by the Sydney filmmaking underground, mixes an intense focus on the reality of surfing, here pushed to the point where it approximates an instructional film, with innovative and spectacular shots from inside the breaking wave. Certain scenes, filmed with a hand-held camera, evoke the practices of cinema verite in a way which suggests, to quote film theorist Paul Arthur out of context, the "liberating marks of rawness as avant-garde work, the crucial distinction is not in theme or narrative approach but in the ability of unfettered technique to register a passionate, subjective confrontation with reality" (Arthur, 1992, p. 39).¹² Such a confrontation reaches its zenith in the final 'Coming of the Dawn' sequence which begins before sunrise at Lennox Head, New South Wales, with waves illuminated by lights attached to the camera rig. As the sun rises the shots are slowed as Greenough, camera strapped to his back pointing backwards as he rides the waves on a kneeboard, films the interior of a tubing wave.

Greenough's perspective inside the wave inaugurated the point of view of a surfer on or in a wave. Prior to this sequence, surf films had been shot from the beach, a position which, even with a telephoto lens, distanced the spectator from the surfing action. Greenough stated that he:

... wanted to get the feel of surfing...not just what it looked like from the beach. The shot looking out of the tube really pushed the envelope of what a surf movie could be, but for raw action, my favourite angle was looking back at the board's track. (Gross, 1999, p. 81)

John Witzig called the 'Coming of the Dawn' sequence 'an astonishing achievement' and argued that if a great film is one that records the lifestyle of a group of people while allowing the personal view, selection and interpretation of the film-maker, then perhaps it is" (Thoms, 2000, p. 112). Witzig's emphasis on the film as a documentary record which draws upon a personal artistic statement was repeated by Albie Thoms who argued that Greenough's work, which was 'more than a surf movie', articulated a 'personal purity of vision' and that the significance of the final sequence 'lies in the fact that it is the first record from inside the waves'. Thoms emphasised the functional, instructional aspect of the sequence when he commented that the scenes provide:

... information of scientific and social importance, information that might help us understand better the quality of life in Australia, how our environment has shaped our characters, what our environment has to offer that might be used to improve our lives. (Thoms, 1978, p.124, emphasis in original)

Greenough replicated the 'Coming of the Dawn' sequence in the final segment of the film *Crystal Voyager*, a film which begins as a biography of Greenough shot by Alby Falzon and culminates in Greenough's own twenty three-minute film-within-a-film 'Echoes', a segment which was originally planned as a short film to support the re-release of *Morning of the Earth*. Produced by David Elfick and directed by Alby Falzon, the team that made *Morning of the Earth*, *Crystal Voyager* examined the multiple talents of George Greenough, surfboard designer, boat builder, filmmaker and philosopher. The focus on a single figure for the entirety of a surf film was in itself an innovation that superseded a popular narrative structure based on the actions of a troupe of surfers filmed in multiple locations. The documentary portrait of Greenough, in which he explains his surfboard designs, boat-building projects, and his philosophy of surfing, contrasts with the film's climactic sequence which actualises and represents the philosophies and positions documented in the early parts of the film.

The final sequence replaces the voice-over of Griersonian documentary with a musical composition, *Echoes*, by Pink Floyd. Members of the band had

seen and been impressed by Greenough's *The Innermost Limits of Pure Fun* and agreed to donate their music to the film. The eclectic and ethereal music is a perfect accompaniment for the "ultimate investigation of the breaking wave" (Thoms, 1978. p. 177). The power of the endlessly tubing wave (the working title of the segment was *The More the Power Grinds Over Your Head, the Less That Lands on Top of You*) is demonstrated in the continuous progression of the surfer through the wave. One critic compared the mesmerizing sequence to the final scene of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), emphasizing the effectiveness of *Crystal Voyager's* (documentary) approach:

Crystal Voyager creates the same feeling (as the end of 2001) using totally real effects: Kubrick constructed the whole thing, but Greenough has filmed the inside of waves and has created something of astounding beauty cinematically. (quoted in Thoms, 2000, p. 121)¹³

Appropriately, Greenough's significant document reworks the long take in an intimate representation of features of the natural world.¹⁴ The 'Echoes' segment – shot at ten times normal speed, a practice which compresses the multiple long takes which Greenough seamlessly joins together into a continuous flow – captures minute details, such as droplets of water on the lens, in its depiction of the surging wave. Such close attention to the natural world suggests the 'imagistic' films of Bert Haanstra, for example, whose *Panta Rhei* ('everything flows', 1951) uses slowed and speeded shots to document aspects of nature, including clouds, birds, patterns left on a beach by surf, and flowers blooming. The poetic approach to nature of Haanstra and Greenough is continued in Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) and his *Powaqqatsi* (1988). Ron Fricke's *Baraka* (1992), and Luc Besson's *Atlantis* (1998) in ways which merge techniques derived from documentary and avant-garde modes. The 'Echoes' sequence of *Crystal Voyager* elevates the film above the standard form of non-fiction 'surf movie' – stylistically unadorned representations of surfing – within a discourse of delirium which informs a documentary record of surfing with varieties of spectacle aligned with avant-garde and experimental film-making. The resultant "visual and aural overload...induces an absorbed, trance-like condition" (Flaus, 1974, p. 277) which exceeds, revises, and replaces the techniques and effects of documentary modes of sobriety.

Textual Offensiveness: Surf Video

The shift from film to video as the preferred medium for the majority of surf texts, operating as part of a movement away from film to video in a variety

of contexts in the early to mid 1970s, corresponded with an expansion of surfing as an industry. Surf clothing companies such as Billabong, Quiksilver, Gotcha, and Rip Curl, or manufacturers of surfboards or wetsuits, were able to adopt and adapt the newly introduced video technology for purposes of advertising their products. The links between an expanding surf industry and video technology contributed to the rise of corporate-backed and heavily commercialised surf videos that reflect the connections in their content and form. The content of the majority of sponsored surf videos is dominated by reportage of the professional surfing circuit, itself a result of the intervention of the same corporate sponsorship responsible for the production of commercial surf videos.

Sponsorship impacts formally on the surf text by imposing advertisements into the texts in formats which range from the overt placement of advertisements between segments in a number of works, to practices of product placement, such as the inclusion in obvious ways of particular brands of surfboards or surf wear. In many cases the 'commodity aesthetic' (Haag, 1986) dominates and sublimates any sense of a textual aesthetic beyond that which is produced by or through sponsorship. For example, Gorilla Grip, maker of a non-slip footpad for surfboards, commissioned videographers Tim Bonython and Jason Muir to produce an annual series featuring the Hawaiian professional surfing titles. Beginning with *Hawaiian Nine-O* (1990), each instalment of the series features twelve surfing segments, many of which are accompanied by a voice-over narration, with advertisements between the segments which, in their placement and alignment with the voice-over, are frequently difficult to distinguish from the surfing content.

Sponsorship inflects the content and form of the surf text in multiple ways, including a veto on the inclusion of any suggestion of drug taking or styles of filming suggestive of drug-induced states, and an abandonment of commissioned music scores in favour of deals between the sponsor and record companies to secure rights to the latest music 'hits' (Thoms, 2000, p. 158). The sexism that permeates the majority of surf videos can also be linked to the practices of commercialism which here, as elsewhere, routinely reproduce reactionary images of gender. Sponsored videos trace equally predictable patterns in other ways. Rip Curl, for example, created *The Search* (1992-1994), a series of videos which follow professional surfers around the world in a format which reinvents the cliché of the surfari popularised in Bruce Brown's *The Endless Summer* (1964). Stylistically, such films and videos, with rare exceptions, avoid the risks of experimentation which "could result in footage that (doesn't) serve the sponsor's best interests" (Thoms, 2000, p. 158).

Sponsored surf videos, like other surf texts, constitute a form of documentary which has been ignored by a documentary film theory concerned with 'sober' canonical texts. However, sponsorship and sponsored texts have been confronted and incorporated within documentary theory: the work of Robert Flaherty, notably *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Louisiana Story* (1948), is exemplary here. Study of Flaherty's work points to the fact that sponsorship does not necessarily result in textual impoverishment. Similarly, certain sponsorship surf videos are stylistically and formally complex. Various works by Jack McCoy, his *Green Iguana* (1992) and *Sik Joy* (1994) are two examples, and Alby Falzon, notably his *Can't Step Twice on the Same Piece of Water* (1992) are sponsored works which transcend the limitations often evident in the practice. Despite such examples, the majority of sponsored surf videos are, as noted, formulaic, clichéd, and hindered in approach by sponsors' agendas and interventions. The result is texts which, in the main, are uninformed by a documentary discourse of delirium capable of expanding or enlarging traditional conceptions of the sobriety of the documentary mode.

Ignoring the limitations of sponsored surf videos, commentators have argued that high production values, especially 'visual quality', linked to production budgets available under commercial sponsorship, are the hallmark of leading surf video directors and the benchmark for work in the genre. However, not all videographers are concerned with producing a visual image that "holds colour, depth and detail the way film does" (Warshaw, 1999, p.20)¹⁵. A number of unsponsored, independent texts, by making a virtue of low production values, are situated in opposition to sponsored texts and the formats and standards of television, which occasionally programs surf videos of broadcast quality. Like certain independent surf films, non-corporate surf videos are structured through a discourse of delirium in which formal experimentation, characterised in the case of independent surf video by expressive. Uncontrolled and primitivist practices, is incorporated into documentary depictions of surfing.

In places, the "wilful technical crudity" (Sontag, 1967, p. 207¹⁶) of independent surf videos informs the documentary mode in ways not achieved in other forms of documentary. In contrast to a smooth tracking shot in which a subject remains in frame, the surfing subject of a number of non-corporate videos may disappear off screen before the camera refocuses on the subject. The constant recognition of off-screen space implicit in the unanticipated shot effectively reveals not reality, composed through textual systems, but the real which lies beyond the frame outside systems of representations. Here, as with surf film, the real is further

actualised through reference to varieties of spectacular visual style which inform the structuring discourse of delirium. The spectacular style of independent surf video is grounded in an aesthetic of motion and speed, produced predominantly through rapid editing. Such a technique is frequently employed by US videographer Taylor Steele, the “Andy Warhol of surfing” (Thoms, 2000, p. 189) who, in many ways, pioneered the independent tradition of surfing videos.

Steele’s early videos captured rising Californian surf stars, including Kelly Slater, Rob Machado and Shane Dorian, in a “brash slash and burn” visual style (Thoms, 2000, p. 188). In his early videos, *Momentum* (1992) and *Momentum II* (1993), Steele made a virtue of the inability of his unsophisticated home video equipment to film in slow motion and taped in real time the aggressive and innovatory manoeuvres which characterised the new surfing styles he documented. As Thoms (2000) noted, “in eschewing the somewhat romantic slow-motion effects that had been standard in surf movies for four decades, his footage seemed fresh...and was assembled with disregard for continuity and the niceties of establishing a scene...” (p.188).

Australian variants of the style followed, among them Glen Winton’s *Rad Moves, Volume 1* (1993). Justin Gane’s *Unleashed* (1994), Chris Stroh’s *Intake and Stoke* (both 1996). Matt Gye’s *Mystery Bag* (1997), and Dylan Longbottom’s *Drive* (1997), and innumerable ‘underground’ videos. The latter works, typically produced anonymously, consist of rough cuts of professional surfing action released immediately after the contests, thus pre-empting and subverting corporate-sponsored productions dealing with the same contests. The majority of these named and anonymous works mobilize a “non-stop visual assault style” (Dunne, 1993, p. 26)¹⁷ in representations which correspond with the style of power surfing, the subject of virtually all contemporary surf videos.

Power surfing developed in the early 1980s as a style of surfing that involves aggressive manoeuvres on the wave, made possible by the introduction of shorter surfboards, including the tri-lin ‘thruster’. Power surfing ascended to dominance during the 1980s and 1990s with some commentators claiming that the introduction of the style marked a new era in surfing (Young and McGregor, 1984). The influence of the style is felt in various ways within surf culture and has resulted in the insistence that “style and power” are the definitive features of good surfing (Gane, 1996, p. 73). Synonymous with power surfing, the term hardcore also refers to an essentially aggressive surfing style, and intersects with the musical genre

used for the soundtrack of many power surf videos.¹⁸ A descendant of punk, with links to thrash, hardcore music is fast, loud, simplistic and lyrically furious – anger derived from opposition to dominant middle-class culture and its celebration in much rock and pop music.

Hardcore music:

... mounted a self-consciously anachronistic attempt to sustain early punk's negativity ... The entirely recalcitrant music provided a besieged subculture with the basis for defensive rituals based in 'sonic and other forms of violence, and an obstinate antiprofessionalism. (James, 1996, p. 224)

The antisocial stance of hardcore music informs a disaffected lifestyle adopted by certain surfers, which one writer for the 'hardcore' magazine *Underground Surf* summarized in terms of opposition and difference: "(w)e (should) encourage surfing to be publicly damned...People don't have to fear us – they just have to NOT WANT TO BE US, not want to identify with a label that spells sick, perverted, deviant" (Stedman, 1997, p. 81). Just as pure surf films represented aspects of the soul surfing way of life, so independent power surf videos feature elements of the hardcore lifestyle. While power surfing and a hardcore soundtrack are the most obvious points of reference to the hardcore attitude, other aspects such as shaven heads and styles of body adornment (notably tattooing and body piercing) are featured. The fact that in most cases it is the male body which is the subject of attention reinforces what is essentially an overtly masculinist basis to the filmed activities in ways which rewrite the object of the gaze of those practices also known as hardcore: contemporary pornography.

The basic components of the hardcore surfing representational style includes rapid, and at times frenetic, parallel cutting, short segments featuring known and, in direct contrast to corporate videos, unknown surfers¹⁹ and frequently grainy and often unfocused images overlaid with the sonic assault of hardcore and thrash music. The hardcore aesthetic of immediacy and crudeness which informs such works is comparable to, and in many cases derived from, the "aggressive primitiveness" (Boddy, 1981, p.27) and "textual offensiveness" of early 1980s video documentations of punk music performances which, in turn, borrowed from the experimental and documentary impulses of 1960s underground film (James, 1996, p. 217). Mirroring and extending these formative traditions, it is not unusual for independent power surf videos to be distributed personally by the producer/director, often via mail order from a home address. In many cases

the artwork for the video cover is simplistic, often little more than a black and white photocopy of a list of contents. As with low-end punk music videos, accessible practices of production and distribution determine that independent surf videos remain:

... within the subculture as its autonomous self-representation and self-expression. Produced and consumed entirely within the subculture (such works promote) a radically amateur aesthetic that refuses the industrial distinction between artist and market. (James, 1996, p. 225)

The effect of such an aesthetic is suggestive of the domestic mode of film and video production, the home movie, and its intimations that anyone can make a film or video, a position celebrated by surf videographers as a feature of the liberating difference between independent videos and the corporate-sponsored text.

Conclusion

The resistive styles of hardcore power surf videos, in their delirious mixing of documentary and *video brut* practices, like the innovative practices of certain pure surf film, confront and enlarge those practices referred to as documentary. Documentary film theorist Michael Renov has recently observed of the condition of documentary film theory that "...too many practices get excluded: too many theoretical questions remain unanswered" (Renov, 1999, p. 323). Unanswered questions and excluded practices suggest a theory that is restricted by its basic tenets. To date documentary theory has, even in the presence of proliferating varieties of practice (among them, so-called reality television), continued to predicate itself on forms of communication and representation which construct the world in terms of earnestness and solemnity and which are wary of representational practices that disrupt or reject traditional modes. Attention to popular forms such as surf texts shifts the theoretical foundations of documentary from sobriety to delirium. The meeting of documentary and avant-garde tendencies within a discourse of delirium rips open the "aesthetic strait-jacket" which, as Renov (1993) has argued elsewhere, has had a deleterious effect on documentary culture (p. 35).

The various surf texts analysed here challenge theoretical assumptions that inform the study of documentary by revealing practices which, while claiming to represent the actual as opposed to a fictional world, do so in ways that have been categorized as experimental and documentary. The

joining of the two traditions of non-fiction – the documentary and the avant-garde – in a resultant discourse of delirium, and its positioning of surf film and surf video as avant-gardist documentaries, forces a reassessment of documentary practices and theoretical approaches to documentary texts which construct them solely in terms of a discourse of sobriety. The productive outcome of such a reassessment is the opening of a space for surf film and surf video, among other texts, to be recognized and included within the previously exclusionary realm of documentary.

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Notes

- (1) Details of the infamous event are supplied in James (1988). The problematic meeting of documentary and the avant-garde is further exemplified through another instance involving the Flaherty seminar. During the 1968 seminar a screening of Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* (1968), a film that seamlessly appropriates the techniques of direct cinema into a fictional format, caused outrage when the closing credits revealed it to be a fiction not a documentary. See Arnold (1979, p.486).
- (2) Booth (1994, 1996) has discussed certain connections between surf texts and the counter-culture, and James (1988) opens his study of avant-garde film of the 1960s with a discussion of the alternative cultural and political movements of the era.
- (3) Nichols made these claims in a slightly different form in Nichols (1994, p.132).
- (4) Tom Gunning's analyses (1990, 1993) of early cinema as a 'cinema of attractions' (a term adapted from Eisenstein) point to the centrality of spectacle in the formation.
- (5) Young indicates, reactions in Australia paralleled similar responses in California where, as *Surfer* magazine wrote in 1975, "surfers honed their yells and shouts through the week and gathered up all the energy they could for the big explosion" (Warshaw, 1999, p.13). Surfer Sonny Vardeman recalled reactions to a screening in California of Greg Noll's *Search for Surf* (1960): "Greg had music going before the film started... the crowd was just going crazy, and Greg was up on stage, getting pelted by beer and soft-drink caps. He finally retreated and turned on the film..." (Booth, 1996, p. 319).

- (6) Such responses have also been noted for audiences of Imax productions. Susan Davis discusses audience reactions to event rides and Imax screenings in Davis (1999, p. 444).
- (7) In this case the experience is more a form of 'jouissance' than 'plaisir'. As Corner (1999) defined Barthes' use of the term, the sensual pleasure which is jouissance is "intense...generating emotions which are at least temporarily out of control..." (p. 100). Such emotions are manifest in an uncontrollable, unruly, audience.
- (8) Kleinhans (1998) discussed the New American Cinema as a "movement (that) ranged from short, visually complex experimental works through cinema-verite documentary to unique dramatic features" (p. 313). Curiously, he included Bruce Brown's *The Endless Summer* within the realm of New American Cinema, a film that does not sit easily with the categories he has outlined.
- (9) A number of critiques have sought to identify and clarify surfing and the surfing lifestyle as a politically adversarial activity. Arguably, the boldest attempt to frame surfing as a textually and politically subversive practice is found in Fiske et al (1987). The question 'Can surfing be genuinely transgressive an alternative to hegemonic capitalist processes?' is addressed in Lewis (1998).
- (10) Though comprised of music from a variety of bands the soundtrack is integrated through a commonality of themes expressed in various song titles: 'Sure Feels Good'; 'Open Up Your Heat'; 'Making it on Your own'; 'I'm Alive'; 'Come with Me'. The emphasis in these titles on an unfettered personal utopianism reflects and extends the film's content.
- (11) James applies this description within an analysis of punk videos and pornographic videos. As the analysis here makes clear, the production and distribution of such works in many ways parallels the production and distributive practices of independent surf videographers.
- (12) In its original context Arthur is talking of the films of Jonas Mekas.
- (13) Kubrick is said to have requested a personal print of *Crystal Voyager* (Shearer, 1999, p. 20).
- (14) According to ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall, the long take constitutes a 'hidden problem' in documentary film: "with the exception of interview material, most of the shots in contemporary documentary films and television programs are only a few seconds long...Documentary thus finds itself in the curious company of

television commercials and music videos in seeking to maintain interest through the dynamics and variety of quick cutting". As MacDougall (1992/1993) noted: "the long take has become the terra incognita of the modern documentary film. A blank space in a practice which devotes itself almost entirely to other problems of the shot. And this is contrary to its heritage for documentary was born in the pleasure of watching such ordinary events as leaves shimmering on a tree..." (p. 36). Greenough's film evoked such pleasures in part through a long take which documents the seemingly endless flow of a wave.

- (15) Independent videographer Justin Gane refuses high production values when he commented that he uses "just an everyday common camcorder. There's no use spending hundreds of thousands (of dollars) on cameras...My best thing is to capture the action as it happens" (Gane, 1996, p. 73).
- (16) Sontag used the phrase in relation to avant-garde film: however, the practices and approaches suggested by the phrase are equally applicable to independent surf video.
- (17) The style is a variety of 'impact aesthetics' which is also employed, in part, in contemporary 'block-buster' spectacles (see McQuire, 2000). Such an aesthetic has also been used in a number of music videos.
- (18) The connections between power surf videos and hardcore and punk music extends to extra-textual situations. It is becoming increasingly common for power surf videos to be screened at hardcore music concerts (for example: the films of Taylor Steele are often screened prior to concerts by the bands Frenzal Rhomb and Pennywise and Tim Bonython's *Biggest Wednesday: Condition Black* (1998), screened in support of performances by Midnight Oil).
- (19) The overuse of imagery of 'star' surfers has led one reviewer to lament the "profile-a-pro format that's so prevalent in today's (sponsored) surf video market" (Slater, 1999, p. 68).

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