

## Economies of Loss and Questions of Style in Contemporary Surf Subcultures

This article examines the relationships between political economy and style within surfing subcultures as represented within selected surf films/videos and other surf media such as magazines. I will analyse surfing style as a way of moving across a wave that is the expression and correlative of more extensive systems of exchange. Because of the transitive (and transactional) nature of style, it is irreducibly an expression of and through movement – the conversion of energies as gesture.

Within the scope of this article, I will focus primarily on surfing subcultures within Southern California from the 1980s onwards, but I also want to suggest a broader applicability of general economic analysis for other periods and places within the history of surfing. As we will see, the notion of “general economy” assumes a quite specific meaning in the work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, who first coined the term.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of introduction, however, it is sufficient to think of general economy as the analysis of how systems of cultural/symbolic exchange and systems of capital exchange interrelate.

The only work to systematically address contemporary surf subcultures in general economic terms is John Fiske’s article “Surfalism and Sandiotics: The Beach in Oz Culture”.<sup>2</sup> Fiske takes Cottesloe Beach in Fremantle, Western Australia as a paradigmatic case study from which he intends to derive a more mobile hermeneutic for reading beach and surf cultures within contemporary society. Fiske interprets beach culture in general, and surf culture in particular, as mediating, in potentially transgressive ways, the relation of ocean and land which configures (within coastal regions such as Australia, California, Hawaii) what Claude Levi-Strauss identified as the master structuring dichotomy of nature and culture. According to Fiske:

The beach is an anomalous category, overflowing with meaning because it is neither land nor sea, neither nature nor culture but partakes of both. It is therefore the place for anomalous behaviour, behaviour which is highly significant because it pushes the cultural as far as it can go to nature: it explores the boundary of what it is to be social, to be cultured...<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the beach, and the practice of surfing in particular, challenges dominant socio-cultural formations by confronting them with their excluded other: nature. Fiske looks particularly at how surfing subcultures translate their facility of movement between culture and nature into “excesses of meaning”, which challenge the dominant culture by privileging the sensual pleasures of the body through a vibrant tribal language and outlaw sensibility.

While Fiske’s article is formative in its recognition of surf culture as meriting critical analysis, it is also instructive in terms of its shortcomings. Firstly, although Fiske describes the signs, languages, and practices that surround surfing, he never engages with a close analysis of the practice of surfing itself. The terminological errors and false generalisations within Fiske’s article testify to the fact that he is not only writing about a (sub)culture to which he is an outsider (even if he is an admirer), but that he does not have a detailed understanding about the practice around which it circulates. In this sense his folly can be compared to Tom Wolfe’s *The Pumphouse Gang*, which provided only an opaque and caricatured glimpse into late-1960s surf cultures around the La Jolla area of San Diego, California.<sup>4</sup> However, the most instructive shortcoming of Fiske’s work is precisely his tendency to try and recuperate the oppositional nature of surf culture in Marxist terms. Fiske overplays the communalism of surf culture (something romanticised both by those who don’t surf and those who are trying to market the “sport”), and he is quietly disappointed with its chauvinism and territorialism. For Fiske, surfing is still always on its way to meaning something else, towards becoming a lever in the Marxist project of exposing the contradictions of capital.

Most discourses on surfing argue for and emphasise those elements that legitimate it as a sport, while militating against its negative stereotyping as the pastime of drop-outs and delinquents. However, in pursuing this critique I want to draw upon the very stereotypes of surfing as a useless, wasteful, and wasting activity as positive phenomena in order to relocate its irreducible and recalcitrant “hard-core”, as apathetically and indiscriminately opposed to Marxist as well as Capitalist economies – both of which still operate under the master signifier of “utility.” Thus, paradoxically, it is from the very notion of surfing as “good-for-nothing” that the general economic significance of its representations in surf films such as *Dogtown and Z-Boys*<sup>5</sup> and *Runman 69*<sup>6</sup> can be most forcefully gleaned.

This tactical shift to a focus on the practice and symbolisation of wastefulness finds support in Georges Bataille’s notion of “gratuitous expenditure.” In his text “The Notion of Expenditure”, Bataille writes that “every time the meaning of a discussion depends on the fundamental value of the word useful – every time the essential question touching on the life of human societies is raised, it is possible to affirm that the debate is necessarily warped and that the fundamental question is eluded.”<sup>7</sup> According to Bataille, this distortion arises from the identification of “shortage” as the central problem within accumulation economies (Capitalism and Marxism) in relation to which “all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” so as to maintain the basic conditions for consumption and continued productive activity.<sup>8</sup> What the scheme of utility conceals and distorts, according to Bataille, is the fact that power, pleasure, and prestige are actually conferred not in the act of accumulation, but rather in “the so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games,

spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality) — activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

“Regulated” forms of expenditure abound in competitive sports and other forms of entertainment such as in casinos, carnivals, and amusement parks. Behind the ostensible objectives of rule-based point accumulation, sports like football, soccer, and ice hockey conceal the pleasures of excessive violence, gambling, and the occasional riot. The pleasures of expenditure are tolerated behind the façade of productive, accumulation-based activity, or as Bataille would argue: the latter is invoked as an alibi for the former. As prophylactic against the unregulated enjoyment of such excesses, sports work to discursively recuperate their social utility in pedagogical terms. For example, sports presume to teach important values like leadership, and discipline, so that even if junior doesn’t become a pro, he’ll carry these lessons into whatever competitive, accumulation-based endeavour becomes his career. On the other hand, gambling and other activities, less capable of intrinsically rationalising themselves in terms of socio-cultural values of accumulation and productive labour, create extrinsic ways of channelling expenditure back into pro-social accumulation. According to this logic Hell’s Angel biker rallies become “Toys for Tots” drives for disabled children, and obsessive gambling is sanctioned through California lotteries as a means of support for public schools.

Regulated movements of expenditure thus function doubly (and duplicitously) to indulge the pleasures of excess, and to ward off the emergence of its unregulated forms. The documentary *Dogtown and Z-boys* focuses on the development of a uniquely urban surf and skateboard subculture in Venice, California during the middle to late 1970s. Through the history of Venice by the Sea, and its amusement park, Pacific Ocean Park, the film traces the eruption of unregulated practices of expenditure within the decaying husk of its regulated forms. An extensive montage of stock footage and still photography confronts Abbot Kinney’s early 20<sup>th</sup>-century creation of Venice as a “West Coast Coney Island” and “California Riviera” with its Post WWII degeneration into what came to be known as “Dogtown.” The formal juxtapositions of the sequence stress the proximity and counterpoint between regulated and unregulated expenditure. As filmmaker Craig Stecyk remarks: “People became a bit uneasy when the circus left town.” The danger, of course, is that when the circus leaves town, the town risks becoming a circus, and of going (proverbially) “to the dogs.”

In the shadow of the partially collapsed pier at Pacific Ocean Park was a surf spot called the “T,” inadvertently formed by a collapsed and partially submerged rollercoaster. Its metal beams jutted perpendicularly into a dangerous obstacle. In a sequence (compiled from Super8 and 16mm film taken during the 1970s) surfers ride dangerously close (in some cases too close) to the wreckage and even ride through the centre of the T. Ironically, the way the surfers race up and down on the waves in rhythmic motions from peak to trough is also known as “rollercoastering.” While the literal rollercoaster followed a rigid and fixed track, the surfers swoop up and down in unpredictable ways, improvising their movements in relation to the changing topography of the waves. Both types of movement spend themselves upon that liminal threshold of the beachfront described by Fiske as the boundary across which the sewage and waste products of capitalist production pour back into nature. But while the

regulated expenditures of Pacific Ocean Park ultimately reinforced a bourgeois ethics, the gratuitous expenditure of the Dogtown crew inscribed an ethics of alienation and exile. Unlike the rollercoaster, the wave is an unregulated movement and an end in itself. It is good for nothing, and the act of riding each wave is an expression of expenditure that is always singular and irrecuperable. It is thus that movements of expenditure become performances of sovereignty, released from the scheme of utility but simultaneously connected to place. For the Dogtown crew, the refuse of Pacific Ocean Park became their exclusive right to spend — an exclusivity enforced by fierce localism and violence. This double gesture of reckless expenditure and protective jealousy with regards to territory underscores the paradoxical “crooked will” that Georges Bataille locates in the more agonistic aspects of expenditure as challenge and contest.



“Pacific Ocean Pier graffiti”, still frame from *Dogtown and Z-boys* of a photo by Craig Stecyk



“Broken boards and sunken roller coaster at the T”, still frame from *Dog Town and Z-boys* of a photo by Craig Stecyk

Bataille identifies his paradigm for such types of expenditure in the archaic practices of Potlatch, described originally by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his book, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Mauss details a number of contests among Native American tribes in the north-western United States that revolve around the gratuitous expenditure of valuables. Curiously, many of these examples involve the casting of objects into bodies of water. In one dramatic example, two rival chiefs confront each other across opposite banks of a river and begin to toss valuables into the water in an escalating pattern of destruction that culminates in the reciprocal slaughter of personal slaves. Similar contests have also been described among the Chumash nation (the coastal Native American tribe stretching from San Diego to Northern California) who tossed copper ingots and weapons into the ocean, as well as sending flotillas of canoes to their destruction in the surf.<sup>10</sup> In all of these cases, power and prestige are a measure not of how much one can accumulate, but of how much loss one is capable of sustaining. In isolation, the contest of Potlatch appears completely antithetical to accumulation economies. Yet, considered in general economic terms, its regulated forms indirectly control accumulation by maintaining an embargo on the privilege

to gratuitously expend. As Bataille observes: “it is only through loss that power and glory are linked to wealth.”<sup>11</sup> Yet wealth, or crime, is the precondition of expenditure.

The hierarchical structure within Dogtown surf/skate culture was similarly defined by prestige conferred not through accumulation, but rather through performances of expenditure and risk in the ocean and on the land. Through one’s movements on the waves, one’s willingness to ride through the “T,” and take off deeper than the next, a surfer gained priority within the pecking order. Yet it was not simply a question of who expended the most energy on the largest wave, but more importantly of the style with which one manoeuvred and moved on the board. For example, the prevailing style of surfing in *Dogtown and Z-boys* is expressed by a relaxed disregard for the risk of expenditure. This style is epitomised by the final shot in the montage of a surfer who races through the “T,” body bowed in a “soul arch” with casual disregard for the rusted metal pylon just a hair’s breath from impaling him. Those interviewed throughout the film reiterate that it was “style” that more than anything else established prestige within the group of adolescents upon which the film focuses. Whether on a surfboard or skateboard, style was the art of moving at high speed, with a high level of risk, but with an almost affected casualness. In other words, making it look easy. The film, and surfing culture in general, also propagates a myth that style is innate and, in itself, unattainable. In this way, style returns the favour for accumulation by making the right of expenditure intrinsic and irreducible. Style thereby becomes atavistic and transcendental by the same stroke. The prestige conferred through the mere acquisition of wealth can have no intrinsic relation to the individual. It may be revoked as easily as an object can be removed from one’s possession. But through style, the movement and gesture of expenditure acquires an element of intrinsic prestige and sovereignty. It does so, paradoxically, through an aggressively defensive annihilation of the signifiers of extrinsic prestige. It destroys an effigy of extrinsic prestige in order to conjure an intrinsic and transcendental quality for the individual. The elusive nature of “style” relates directly to its importance within the context of expenditure. For whatever resists definition also resists subtraction. In other words, style cannot be taken away precisely because it is a function of the casualness and magnanimity with which one risks and sustains loss.



“Soul Arch’ at the T”, still frame from *Dogtown and Z-boys*



“Through the T”, still frame from *Dogtown and Z-boys*

It is this ratio of apparent effortlessnes to magnitude and magnanimity of expenditure that broadly defined surfing style in California during the 1970s. By contrast, labouring too hard on a wave was a sign of indignity. But for the accomplished stylist in the water, the suffering of other indignities upon the land only served to heighten prestige. Like the slaughtered body thrown into the water, or the canoe smashed on the rocks, the wasted life of the beautiful loser became elevated through banishment from mundane, utilitarian ends. This is why the film lingers with such adoring and almost fawning reverence upon the personal biography of Jay Adams. Adams is singled out as the one possessed of the most “natural” style — he didn’t have to try or practice. He was also the craziest of the bunch — fearless to the point of recklessness. While his contemporaries such as Tony Alva and Stacy Peralta successfully converted their underground status into successful business enterprises, Jay was the one who spent whatever he earned on drugs, and could never conform to the expectations of corporate sponsors. His body has also become markedly abject by the tattooing of his face, neck, and hands (areas that cannot be covered by a business suit or work uniform) voluntarily condemning himself to an alienated status outside most forms of productive labour.

Surfing changed considerably during the late 1970s and 1980s in parallel with the growth of the surf industry and the institutionalisation of contest surfing. Perhaps this change was connected to the end of the oil crisis and the coming economic boom of the early 1980s, which brought considerable amounts of investment into beachside communities such as Venice, Santa Monica, and Huntington Beach. Now upper-middle class neighbourhoods, these areas had remained virtual ghettos throughout the 1970s. Perhaps the change was also linked to the development of the tri-fin by Australian Simon Andersen. Much more stable and forgiving than either the single or twin-finned boards ridden exclusively during the 1970s, the tri-fin would reward spastic, hopping motions with bursts of speed. By contrast, the single fin and twin fin required careful transitions between rail and plane to generate momentum. Most overtly, the 1980s were characterised by the “sportification” of surfing, which sought to align the practice with the accumulation economy underlying other popular sports, and to recuperate the image of the surfer from that of drop-out and loser.

Key figures in this trend were Australian transplants Ian Cairns and Peter Townsend who together founded the National Scholastic Surfing Association (NSSA) in Southern California at the beginning of the 1980s. In their support of professionalism and competition, Cairns and Townsend were by no means characteristic of Australian surf culture, which was at least as anti-establishment during the 1970s as that in California. As founding members of the “Bronzed Aussies,” the two were ridiculed within the Australian surfing press and culture for their matching costumes, sponsorship logos, and desire to “professionalise” surfing.<sup>12</sup> Yet Cairns and Townsend saw themselves on a mission to reform “the sport.” To do so they struck right at what they believed to be the heart of the problem, the association between surfing and school dropouts. In the NSSA students had to maintain a minimum grade point average to compete in the contests, and drug and alcohol use was strictly forbidden. Top ranked NSSA surfers often obtained sponsorship deals from surf companies that turned into paid contracts, and the now defunct PSAA circuit (Professional Surfing Association of America) developed with industry support to provide a regional stage for the professional surfers moving up through the system. The synergies between the surf industry (which would be trading on the stock

exchange by the end of the 1980s) and growing popular surf culture were also forged through televised surfing contests and the accelerated production of surf videos. Unlike surf movies of the past, these videos were not aimed primarily at theatrical release, and served largely as promotion pieces for the surf companies' top stars and, of course, products.

While 70s surfing movement style was marked by understatement and anti-commercialism, 80s surf style (if it can be called that) took a dramatic turn towards hyper-kinetic surfing that tried to fit as many manoeuvres as possible into a single wave highlighted by flamboyantly coloured wetsuits and boards splattered liberally with corporate logos. This atomisation of seventies flow into a serial iteration of "manoeuvres" followed from the contest judging criteria propagated by the NSSA. These focused primarily on quantity of turns and length of ride, relegating "style" to a subordinate and un-defined category. The 70s icon of the "fly-away" (shooting one's board triumphantly into the air after the wave closes out) was replaced by the practice of "grovelling" (riding the closed-out wave all the way in to shore while gyrating the board as much as possible to accumulate the maximum number of points).

In juxtaposition with the disciplining and professionalisation of surfing there still remained a hard-core, which adopted some of the equipment advances of the 1980s but still conferred prestige through an economy of loss, and which found its anti-heroes outside the surfing mainstream and largely beneath the radar of the surf media. This sensibility found expression during the 1980s in underground surf videos such as *Runman*, *Runman 2: Headbut Party*, *Runman 69*, and *Runmental* (early 1990s). Shot mostly in and around the Los Angeles area, the videos focused on mostly non-professional surfers in extremely dangerous conditions at semi-secret breaks; on a skateboarder who bombs Sunset Boulevard at 60 miles per hour, running straight through red lights; and on natural disasters, public riots and beach parking lot fights. *Runman 69* also ridiculed the type of contest surfing that had become synonymous with the 1980s. The film presents sequences of surfers gyrating their boards spastically in small waves to generate points and taunts them in voice over: "pump and spaz and gyrate, spaz and turn and gyrate, spaz and turn and pump, pump and turn and pump, spaz!" In addition to the degradation of surfing into a grovelling for points (like scrambling for loose change on the sidewalk), the sequence also dwells on the indignity of the pink priority buoy by which the assertion of hierarchy in the water is relegated to a hyperactive paddling race.



"Pump and spaz and gyrate", still frame from *Runman 69*



"I am surfing on heroin", still frame from *Runman 69*

The film's revulsion in the face of such indignities is expressed most forcefully in the final scene of *Runman 69*, which shows surfers soul-arching into huge and borderline unrideable, shorebreak waves to the tune of "I'm surfing on heroin." One of the surfers proudly displays his surfboard, which has a Chevrolet "bowtie" logo with the word "Rat" in place of a surf company logo. This parody of branding explicitly celebrates gratuitous expenditure through its double symbolism. The term "rat" invokes both the stereotype of the "surf rat" and also the nickname for General Motors' 454 cubic inch "big block" V8 engine — the most powerful and inefficient motor ever produced by Chevrolet in a production automobile.

It is also revealing that these two sequences are interspersed by another, which features a man paddling out into small surf on a pre-modern wooden paddleboard. The accompanying dialogue gently ridicules the attempt to nostalgically return to the innocent beginnings of surfing. The scene is quite revealing of the degree to which underground surf cultures in California during the 1980s had become more reactionary than nostalgic in the attempt to reassert authenticity against the influx of an accumulation-based professionalism.

The film also seems to anticipate the contemporary revival of "soul surfing" and "retro style" as a new marketing niche for the surf industry of the new millennium. Some observers of surf culture, notably Dave Parmenter, have been critical of this revival. He writes: "Looking at them, it is tempting to dismiss this 'retro' trend as little more than boilerplate 'soul,' where overpaid surf stars dabble in the 70s fashion revival by posing on garage sale single-fins as a sort of foreplay to fireside guitar jamborees."<sup>13</sup> The threat against which surf subcultures truly militate is not that of cultural rejection but of commercial appropriation. As Parmenter's remarks suggest, the surf industry of the new millennium is not only selling professionalism, but also anti-mainstream and even anti-corporate imagery and personalities. There are an increasing number of surf companies paying surfers renowned for their style and courage to be living enactments of an economy of loss, thereby attempting to commute the prestige conferred through such performances to the aura of a corporate brand.

- 1 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967).
- 2 John Fiske, "Surfalism and Sandiotics: The Beach in Oz Culture," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1, 1 (September 1983).
- 3 Fiske, 131.
- 4 Tom Wolfe, *The Pumphouse Gang* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965).
- 5 *Dog Town and Z-boys*, directed by Stacy Peralta (Agi Orki Productions, Vans off the Wall Productions, 2001).
- 6 *Runman 69*, directed by Ray Kleinman (Runman Productions, 1992).
- 7 Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927- 1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), 116.
- 8 Bataille, 117.
- 9 Ibid, 118.
- 10 Ibid, 122.
- 11 Ibid.



- 12 See Greg Heller, "Bronzed Aussies," at [http://www.surflife.com/surfaz/bronzed\\_aussies.cfm](http://www.surflife.com/surfaz/bronzed_aussies.cfm). last visited on 29 April 2005. See also, "Billion Dollar Breakers: The Professional Surfing World," radio transcript from Background Briefing, Radio National (13April, 1997) at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s10600.htm>. last visited on 29 April 2005.
- 13 Dave Parmenter, "Dawn of the Morning of the Earth: Is the Retro Trend a Trip Back to the Future, or Just Back to the '70's?" *Surfermag.com*. last visited on 29 April 2005.

**Kevin Fisher** is a Lecturer at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, where he teaches courses in Film and Media Studies and Visual Culture. Kevin has published on film theory and digital special effects, and is currently completing his PhD thesis: "Intimate Elsewheres: Altered States of Consciousness in Post-WWII American Cinema" in the UCLA Department of Film, TV, and Digital Media.