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R. L. Rutsky

Surfing the Other

Ideology on the Beach

From the late 1950s to the mid-1960s a wave of teen surfing films washed over the screens of drive-ins and theaters across the United States. At a time when many motion picture companies were struggling, these surfing or beach pictures were extremely popular with the increasingly youthful audiences for movies.¹ Films such as Columbia Pictures' *Gidget* series and American International Pictures' *Beach Party* films were designed to appeal to this youthful market, and they apparently did. *Beach Party* (1963) was a major hit, breaking box-office records in a number of locales; *Bikini Beach* (1964) was AIP's biggest-grossing film ever.² Annette Funicello was voted onto the exhibitors' annual top ten list of new stars, as were Sandra Dee and James Darren, the stars of *Gidget* (1959).³

Yet the beach films were very different from the melodramatic stories of troubled youth that had become the standard teen fare of the 50s. They were not teenage versions of the social problem film, built around such perceived dangers as hot-rodding, drugs, rock-and-roll, sexuality, and delinquency. Instead they featured, as *Beach Party* director William Asher once observed, "kids having a good time and not getting in trouble."⁴ In most of the surfing films, audiences were presented with the comic and romantic escapades of white suburban teenagers having good clean fun at the beach.

Thomas Doherty has in fact described these kinds of films as examples of the "clean teenpic": "Fulfilling the best hopes of the older generation, the clean teenpics featured an aggressively normal, traditionally good-looking crew of fresh young faces, 'good kids' who preferred dates to drugs and crushes to crime."⁵ Similarly, writing of the characters in the AIP *Beach Party* films, Gary Morris observes that



On the beach with Annette Funicello

The delinquents [of previous AIP teen films] are reborn in the beach movies as well-groomed, "normal" middle-class, surfing, singing "clean teens"—based largely on the image of lily-white youngsters seen on television shows like *Ozzie and Harriet* and *American Bandstand* and successful mainstream movies like Paul Wendkos's 1958 *Gidget*.⁶

For both Doherty and Morris, the middle-class, clean-teen normality of the beach movies is evidence of not only their superficiality, but of their attempt to offer a reassuring conformity as an escape from the troubling social problems of the times. In contrast to the teen problem and juvenile delinquent films of the 50s and the anti-establishment youth films of the late 60s, these films often seem to exist in a kind of historical time warp, a perpetual summer where the sun always shines and the surf is always up.⁷ The turbulent social and political issues of the 60s never seemed to intrude upon the beach. As Morris notes, "The beach movies helped turn the beach into an exaggerated version of the suburban backyard."⁸ Even when these films

did deal explicitly with issues of morality and responsibility, the resolution rarely seemed in question. No one could seriously doubt that Gidget would keep her virginity or that Moondoggie would return to college when the summer was over.

I have no quarrel with the way that Doherty and Morris characterize these films and their characters. Indeed, the idea that these films are conventional, white, and middle class, that their “normality” serves to deny social problems and to support ideological conformity, is hardly an astonishing revelation. What is more problematic, however, is the all-too-common assumption that notions of conventionality, conformism, and normality, of reassurance and escapism, serve to “explain” these films and their appeal. Morris, for example, explains the appeal of the *Beach Party* films by noting that their “subtext is *reassurance*” and observes,

The films deny the growing split in the social fabric—evident from the Cold War (fear of nuclear holocaust), collapsing race relations, and drug use, the sexual revolution, and the emerging Vietnam War. They show teenagers as wistful, comic, conformist creatures, sexless and predictable, ultimately willing to carry on the traditions of consumer capitalism that they, as voracious consumers themselves, clearly benefit from.⁹

Here, although he will later observe that the form of these films tends to “subvert their own theme of comforting conformity,”¹⁰ Morris comes perilously close to asserting that audiences for these films (apparently unlike cultural critics) are conformist cultural dupes. It is difficult to imagine, however, how teenage viewers of these films—or any viewers, for that matter—would take pleasure in identifying with such “sexless and predictable” conformity, particularly when Morris himself argues that the appeal of earlier AIP teen films was based on their depiction of crime, lurid sexuality, and the rejection of social conventions. If the appeal of the surfing films is based on escape from and reassurance about societal problems, how was it that those same problems apparently served as the basis for the appeal of those earlier teen films? Similarly, how are we to explain the apparently sudden shift in attitudes among youthful audiences between the comforting conformity of these films and the sexuality, violence, and anti-establishment sentiments of such popular youth-oriented films of the later 1960s as *The Graduate* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), and *Easy Rider* (1969)? Are we simply to assume that the teenagers who went to see *Beach Blanket Bingo* in 1965

were not the same young people who attended *The Graduate* two years later?

It scarcely seems credible that the attitudes of young moviegoers could change so dramatically in such a short time, first embracing social problems, then normality, then 60s counterculture. And while viewers often hold contradictory attitudes at the same time, the existence of such contradictions suggests that any desires for a comforting conformity must have existed alongside more nonconformist desires. Thus, viewing these films solely in terms of a reactionary reassurance and conformity is to ignore, as critics accuse these films of doing, the very ideological contradictions that these critics have seen as symptomatic of the time. To take but one example, one might well see the parodic and irreverent escapism of the *Beach Party* films as quite similar to that of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *Help* (1965), and *Head* (1968)—films that have often been cited as quintessential examples of the more nonconformist attitudes and filmmaking styles of the 60s.

In comparing beach films and Beatles films, I do not, of course, wish to collapse the differences between them, but merely to suggest that any reading that sees the beach films and their appeal simply as ideologically reactionary is, at best, partial and somewhat misleading. At worst, it involves an elitist distinction between the ideological conformity of the audiences for these films and the ideological awareness of the cultural critic.

Moreover, to see these films solely in terms of conformity, reassurance, or escapism is, I believe, to give far too much credence to the power and the pleasure of conformity. It overlooks the degree to which the appeal of these films also depends on elements of sexual, cultural, and ideological difference that can never be simply or entirely normalized. However much these films seem to affirm sexless romance and conformity to white, middle-class values and morality, it is also the case that sexuality, parodic irreverence, and nonconformity are crucial to their appeal. Indeed, in these films, the appeal of surfing and surf subculture is often based on the attractiveness of nonconformist, irreverent, and anti-bourgeois attitudes cobbled together from elements of teenage culture, rock-and-roll, bohemian philosophy, and beat culture and mixed with a heavy dose of parody. This appeal is, moreover, linked to the allure of non-Western cultures, derived in large part from surfing's own Pacific Island origins. Appropriated and submerged within the white, bourgeois milieu of the beach, these “other” elements are nevertheless crucial to these films' appeal. I want to examine how these anti-bourgeois and non-Western

elements inflect the beach or surfing films in order to show how cultural criticism has often neglected the appeal of nonconformity and otherness in “conformist” cultural products and how it has denied the cultural critic’s own involvement, pleasure, and fascination in the object of study.

Vacations and Surf Bums

Most analyses of surfing or beach films duly note the extent to which they subordinate the surfing scene and culture to bourgeois notions of work, sexual morality, and monogamous relationships. The playful party atmosphere of the beach is therefore typically presented as a mere vacation, or as a last summer fling before adulthood. At the beginning of *Beach Party*, for example, Frankie and Annette (here, her character is named Dolores; in subsequent films she is known as Dee Dee) sing, “Vacation is here, beach party tonight,” as they ride along the beach in an open-topped jalopy with their surfboards visible behind them. Similarly, *Muscle Beach Party* (1964) opens with Frankie and Dee Dee singing, “Easter vacation, we might stay until the middle of May. Grab your boards and follow us, surfer’s holiday.” Thus, the beach is represented as a place of freedom, where the responsibilities of work, school, and marriage are temporarily suspended in favor of the playful hedonism of parties, surfing, teenage sexuality, and romantic flings. In both *Beach Party* and *Muscle Beach Party*, Frankie is attracted to sexually provocative foreign women. These liaisons, of course, prove to be merely temporary flirtations. His inevitable reunion with Dee Dee—the “good girl” who does not engage in sex before marriage—affirms the more lasting values of love and marriage over the transient summer pleasures of casual sexuality. Thus, the freedom and live-for-the-present hedonism of the beach tend to be represented as childish or adolescent in contrast to the adult values of responsibility, work, and marriage.

Perhaps the most clearly articulated statement of these values occurs in one of the earliest of the surfing films, *Gidget*, where the acceptance of adult morality and responsibility is cast in terms of a conventional coming-of-age narrative: Gidget has to find a balance between the adolescent pleasures of the surfing clique and the adult responsibilities of “proper” behavior, especially proper sexual behavior. This distinction between adolescent and adult behavior is frequently represented in heavily gendered terms. Here, as in the *Beach Party* series and many other Hollywood films, the female lead is a good girl who serves to represent

adult morality and responsibility—settling down, monogamy, family, work—in contrast to the irresponsible hedonism of the male characters. As Gidget’s boyfriend, Moondoggie, puts it, “A girl like you—you’re a real responsibility.” Thus, the major narrative—and ideological—conflict of the film, for both Gidget and Moondoggie, is presented in terms of a choice between responsible behavior and the more free-spirited but irresponsible life of the surfers. This choice is highlighted in Gidget’s abortive attempt to be hedonistic by having a fling with the Kahoona, as well as in Moondoggie’s decision to take on the responsibility of a relationship with Gidget—and with it, returning to college and working for his father’s business—rather than dropping out and traveling the world as a surf bum. There is, of course, no more doubt about the eventual outcome of these choices than there is that Frankie and Dee Dee will be reunited at the end of the *Beach Party* films.

But to read the surfing movies solely in terms of the way their narrative resolutions tend to uphold conformity to bourgeois values is to miss the point of these films, to misunderstand their appeal—and that of surfing more generally. For the attraction of the surfing films, and of surf subculture, is much less a matter of the reassuring pleasures of bourgeois conformity than of the thrill of nonconformity, the attraction of a certain difference, both sexual and otherwise. And while it may be true that the beach movies tend to recuperate that difference, to domesticate the otherness on which their appeal depends, there is no reason that film and cultural critics should follow them in this, similarly ignoring the extent to which the appeal of these films is based on the appeal of difference, of the other.

In *Gidget*, for example, the nonconformist attitudes of surf subculture are personified in the leader of the surfing crew (Cliff Robertson). The Great Kahoona is a self-confessed full-time surf bum who espouses an explicitly anti-bourgeois philosophy of avoiding work and commitments, living for the present, and traveling the world’s surf spots. When Gidget asks him, “Doesn’t everybody have to have a goal?” his casual reply is, “Who said?” He lives in a shack on the beach, surfing, smoking cigars (even on his surfboard), and generally enjoying himself, with no responsibilities and no visible means of support. Indeed, it is suggested that he is something of a leech, living off the largesse of others: He invites Gidget to a beach party on the proviso that she bring steaks from her parents’ freezer and counsels Moondoggie to accept a check from his father so that he and Moondoggie can go to Peru to surf. Near the end of the film, in fact, a

disillusioned Moondoggie goes so far as to call him lazy. Yet, however much the film attempts to portray his bohemian lifestyle as irresponsible in contrast to the middle-class responsibilities that are represented by Gidget, it cannot avoid the fact that the freedom of this lifestyle is a major part of the appeal of surfing and surfing subculture.

This surf-bum emphasis on freedom, dropping out, and living for the present obviously corresponds to and indeed draws from the slightly older beatnik subculture of the 1950s. Elements associated with beat culture, such as goatees and bongo drums, appear with regularity in the surfing films. In *Gidget*, for example, we are introduced to a bearded member of the surfing gang known as Lord Byron and told, "The beard means he digs existentialism." The playing of bongos occurs, particularly in party scenes, in a number of surf films, including *Gidget*, *Beach Party*, and *Ride the Wild Surf* (1964). Often, however, these elements of beat culture are treated, as in AIP's beach series, rather parodically. In *Beach Party* and *Muscle Beach Party*, for example, the club where the surfing crew hangs out looks suspiciously like a Greenwich Village coffee

house and is called Big Daddy's, a name clearly borrowed from beat slang. When we see the inside of Big Daddy's, the camera focuses on the playing of bongos and young women in black leotards practicing yoga. The owner of Big Daddy's, Cappy Kaplan (Morey Amsterdam), is a beatnik parody who sports a goatee and introduces himself as a poet. When we first see him in *Beach Party*, he is spouting a parodic version of beat, free-form poetry while wearing an "oriental" mask on the back of his head. He also claims—in what is clearly a joke on beatnik guru-worship—to be waiting for "the word" from Big Daddy, a derelict who sleeps through the entire movie, waking only in the last seconds to reveal himself as Vincent Price (the word that he gives us turns out to be a pitch for AIP's Edgar Allan Poe series).

Beach Party's parody of nonconformist, beatnik cultural elements is, however, somewhat different from its parody of the nonconformity of motorcycle-gang juvenile delinquents who appear in earlier teen films. Cappy Kaplan, though clearly older than his teen customers, is presented as their lovable eccentric and friend; Big Daddy's is their hang-out. While Eric Von Zipper



Above: Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon
in *Beach Party*

Right: James Darren, Sandra Dee,
and Cliff Robertson in *Gidget*



(Harvey Lembeck) and his motor-cycle gang, The Ratz (the female members are Mice), are, like Cappy, clearly older than the teen surfing crew, their age only makes them more ridiculous. Overage juvenile delinquents (Von Zipper's lieutenant is named, significantly enough, JD), they are presented as comically idiotic and completely ineffectual in their attempts to spoil the teenagers' fun. Indeed, the film's preference for beatnik culture over that of the juvenile delinquent may well be determined by their different attitudes toward fun, parties, hedonism.

Earlier teen films featuring juvenile delinquents, motorcycle gangs, and the like tended, for all their lurid appeal, to be rather serious; their young protagonists often appeared more tortured than fun-loving (it is difficult to imagine James Dean or Marlon Brando in a surfing movie). On the other hand, the nonconformity of beat culture, at least as filtered through films and other media, seems to have been associated much more with a certain hedonism, or at least with a distaste for work and responsibility.¹¹ These qualities were condensed in stereotyped comic portrayals of the beatnik, such as Maynard G. Krebs in television's "Dobie Gillis," described by one commentator as "a goateed and sweatshirted free spirit who shuddered whenever the word 'work' was uttered."¹² Significantly, "Dobie Gillis" first appeared on the air in 1959, the year that *Gidget* arrived in movie theaters, and ended in 1963, the year that *Beach Party* was released.¹³

The idea of the surf bum is clearly inherited from these notions of the beatnik as a free-spirited nonconformist more interested in enjoying life than in taking on the bourgeois responsibilities of work, marriage, and family. In most of the surfing films, in fact, the entire surfing lifestyle is presented in terms of personal

enjoyment, fun, and parties on the beach, and in contrast to work and responsibility. If this makes the beach a location where the harsh realities of war and social issues can be escaped, it is at least equally a place of freedom and nonconformity, a place for those who wish to drop out of the bourgeois lifestyle.

Rock-and-Roll on Bikini Beach

The teen-oriented subculture of the surfing films did not, of course, simply adopt the elements of an older, beatnik lifestyle without alteration, but mixed them with other elements, particularly with elements of rock-and-roll and teen pop-music culture. Often, the leading roles in these films were played by actors who were also successful pop singers: James Darren in the *Gidget* films, Fabian and Shelley Fabares in *Ride the Wild Surf*, and Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello in the *Beach Party* series. In most cases, they had already achieved stardom with rock-and-roll and teen-music audiences prior to their roles in the surfing films. By casting these pop-music stars in starring roles, the surfing films were clearly designed to capitalize on their preexisting appeal—and that of music, songs, and dancing—to teenaged audiences.

This relationship between stardom in the teen music industry and in the movie business is exemplified in the careers of Frankie Avalon and Fabian. Both became teen idols under the tutelage of Philadelphia starmaker Bob Marcucci, who parlayed their clean-cut good looks and mediocre singing talents into a string of Top 40 hits and successful film careers. Avalon was the more successful of the two, with 13 songs reaching the Billboard Top 40 between 1958 and

Muscle Beach Party



1962, including two number one hits, “Venus” and “Why,” in 1959, but Fabian had eight Top 40 hits, with “Turn Me Loose,” “Tiger,” and “Hound Dog Man” all reaching the top ten.¹⁴ Both began their movie careers while they were still successful pop singers—with Avalon first appearing in *Disc Jockey Jamboree* in 1957 and Fabian starring in his first film, *Hound-Dog Man*, in 1959—but continued in films long after their recording careers were over.

Marcucci did not, of course, invent this formula for turning teen idol singing stars into movie stars; indeed, he merely followed the model that had recently been pioneered by the career of Elvis Presley (and to a lesser degree, Pat Boone).¹⁵ The first of Elvis’s long string of commercially successful Hollywood films, *Love Me Tender*, appeared in 1956, quickly followed by *Loving You* and *Jailhouse Rock* in 1957 and *King Creole* in 1958. The success of these films at the box office made clear to Hollywood the appeal of rock-and-roll and pop music, particularly to the newly developing teenage audience. The beach movies both drew on this appeal and added elements to it; during the early to mid-1960s, one can even see a certain cross-pollination between the beach movies and the Elvis films, with a number of Elvis’s films also being set on beaches or in tropical locales: *Blue Hawaii* (1961), *Fun in Acapulco* (1963), *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* (1966), *Clambake* (1967). Similarly, Shelley Fabares, who had herself achieved pop-music stardom with her 1962 number one hit, “Johnny Angel,” would go on to an acting career that included costarring opposite Elvis in three of his films, both before and after her role in *Ride the Wild Surf*.

The surf films are much like the Elvis films in another way too: one of the main accusations leveled

against them is that they cleaned up and toned down the wilder aspects of rock-and-roll, its rebellious, nonconformist attitudes and especially its sexuality. Even before the *Beach Party* films, for example, Frankie Avalon had premiered on Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” as part of Clark’s efforts to promote the image of the clean teen. Annette Funicello, of course, first gained fame as a child star on Walt Disney’s “The Mickey Mouse Club,” and even when she later became a teenage star on the pop-music scene, her image remained—under Disney’s strict guardianship—one of chaste propriety. In her autobiography, she recalls that, while on tour with Dick Clark’s Caravan of Stars, the other performers were instructed to clean up their language and behavior while around her.¹⁶ Even by the time that *Beach Party* was made and she was no longer a teenager, she remained under contract to Disney, which stipulated that she would not appear in the film in a bikini.¹⁷

Yet, for all the efforts that the surfing films made to clean up the rebellious, sexually charged image of rock-and-roll and teen music, a major element of their appeal, like that of the Elvis films, was precisely their combination of music and dance—and the image of sexuality and freedom associated with them. Frankie and Annette’s duets, usually sung on the beach itself, constantly extol the seemingly sanitized and desexualized pleasures of vacations, surfing, and beach parties. Yet the very idea of a beach party suggests teens listening to rock-and-roll music and dancing in a way that was already seen by the guardians of morality as heavily sexualized, and doing so in the titillating attire of swim trunks and, especially, bikinis. As James H. Nicholson, coproducer of the AIP *Beach Party* series, observed: “We are fully aware that our beach bunnies in bikinis are a prime attraction for the teenaged boy



Beach Blanket Bingo

who brings his teenaged girl friend to the theatre to see the barechested surfers.”¹⁸ In setting rock-and-roll music and dancing on the beach, where the participants could dance in bikinis and swim trunks, these films often heightened the sexuality and sense of freedom associated with teens and rock-and-roll.

The highlighting of sexuality is nowhere more apparent than in *Bikini Beach*, the third film in the AIP series. The film begins with shots of a never-identified woman in a bikini, intercut with shots of the various accidents she causes among the males who see her. This short sequence is immediately followed by the appearance of Frankie, Dee Dee, and the gang driving up to the beach while singing yet another paean to summer vacation, fun, and Bikini Beach. Yet, if Bikini Beach is “where the fun is had,” this fun is not necessarily as clean, as desexualized, as some critics would have us believe, for Bikini Beach is also the place where “all the chicks are bikini-clad.” The stuffy antagonist of the surfers in *Bikini Beach*, Harvey Huntington Honeywagon (Keenan Wynn), makes this quite clear when he complains that “this savage music . . . stimulates their post-adolescent preoccupation with sex.”

The conjunction of bikini-clad sexuality and rock-and-roll music and dancing appears throughout the *Beach Party* films. Perhaps the most obvious example of this motif can be found in the dancing of Candy Johnson, who is billed in *Beach Party* as “Miss Perpetual Motion,” and who is featured as a character in several of the later films, including *Bikini Beach*. Much like the woman in the opening sequence of *Bikini Beach*, Candy, her gyrations accentuated by her fringed bikini top and pants, has the ability to literally bowl men over with the sexuality of her dancing, to knock them down with a thrust of her hips. As Deadhead observes, “That Candy sure has ‘the power.’”¹⁹

The surfing films’ mixture of the fun and sexuality of the beach with that of rock-and-roll is not, however, restricted to simply their representation of beach parties and dancing. The same critics who protest the mild, pop-oriented songs of Frankie and Annette as an example of the beach movies’ cleaning up and toning down of rock-and-roll often seem to forget that surf music is also a prominent feature in many of these films. Although many people associate surf music with the pristine harmonies of The Beach Boys and Jan and Dean, much of surf music is instrumental and relies on the prominent use of electric guitars, often heavy with fuzz-tone and echo-box effects.

Surf music had begun to become a force in popular music shortly before the making of the first *Beach*

Party film. In 1962, surf music had just begun to hit the charts in a big way, with The Marketts’ “Surfer’s Stomp” reaching the Top 40 early in the year, followed by The Beach Boys’ first hit, “Surfin’ Safari,” and The Tornados hitting number one with “Telstar” in December. By 1963, the year that *Beach Party* was released, surf music had become a craze—The Beach Boys had six songs go into the Top 40, including “Surfin’ USA” (no. 3) and “Surfer Girl” (no. 7). Jan and Dean had a number one hit with “Surf City,” while The Surfaris’ “Wipeout” reached number two, The Marketts’ “Out of Limits” number three, and Chantay’s “Pipeline” number four. The Trashmen’s “Surfin’ Bird” reached the Top 40 in late 1963 and continued up the charts to number four early the next year.

The surfing films played on this craze. *Beach Party* and *Muscle Beach Party* featured performances by Dick Dale and the Del-Tones, a surf group perhaps best known for their “Let’s Go Trippin’,” which has been named as among the ten best surf songs of all time.²⁰ Another well-known surf band, The Pyramids, whose song “Penetration” reached the Top 20 in early 1964, appeared in *Bikini Beach* that same year. (Indeed, they are the band playing behind Harvey Honeywagon’s condemnation of the sexuality of the surfers’ music.) The title song of *Ride the Wild Surf*, which would reach the Top 20 a few months after the film’s release, was performed by Jan and Dean. *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* (1965) featured The Kingsmen (of “Louie, Louie” fame) and a non-performing appearance by Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys.

The appeal of surf music, like that of surfing itself, has indeed been presented as a matter of fun. After all, The Beach Boys even had a hit song titled “Fun, Fun, Fun.” Yet this fun was not nearly so clean or innocent as The Beach Boys’ harmonies might at first make it appear. The pursuit of danger and thrills is one of the main themes of surf music and this is reflected not only in the lyrics of many of the songs but also in the frenetic beat of songs like “Wipeout,” “Surfin’ Bird,” and “Surfin’ Safari.” The pursuit of thrills is equally prominent in the surfing films, where drag racing and sky diving are often featured in addition to the thrills of surfing. Nearly the entire plot of *Ride the Wild Surf* is built around the pursuit of danger, from braving the big waves on the North Shore to high diving into a shallow pool. This pursuit of danger is echoed in Jan and Dean’s title song, with its chorus line that repeats “Gotta take that one last ride.” Clearly, the notion of fun involved here—from wild surf to wild bikinis, wild rides to wild dancing—is not readily described as “clean.”

The Anthropology of Surfing

The notion of wildness suggests a certain unfettered intensity, which is connected to the thrill-seeking aspects of surfing. It also suggests a certain freedom, which is very much related to the beat aspects of surf culture. Obviously, too, the notion of wildness—with its suggestions of both intensity and freedom—has certain sexual connotations, which the surf movies exploit by linking the sexual freedom associated with the beach (“wild bikinis”) to the wild sexuality of rock-and-roll music and dancing. Yet wildness also has another connotation in the surfing films: its appeal is very much connected to the exoticized appeal of “other,” non-Western cultures. This connection is drawn in large part from surfing’s Pacific Island origins, but it also plays on beat culture’s fascination with non-Western, and particularly Third World, cultures, as well as on a more general exoticism which often imputes wildness and sexual freedom to so-called primitive cultures. Indeed, the beat-style nonconformity and beach-party sexuality that appear in the surfing films, and in surf subculture generally, are themselves heavily dependent on borrowings from Third World, and particularly Pacific Island, cultures.

In *Gidget*, for example, the leader of the surfing gang—with his beatnik-style attitudes toward work and responsibility—is known as the Great Kahoona, a title that we are told means Big Chief in Hawaiian, and which was supposedly conferred on him during his travels by a friendly Hawaiian chief. Actually, the word kahuna is generally translated as “priest” or “keeper of the secret,” but since there were kahuna for many daily activities, the word can also, by extension, be understood to mean “expert.”²¹ The honorific of “Kahoona,” then, not only draws upon the exoticism associated with Hawaiian culture, it also serves to convey a special knowledge and commitment. The Great Kahoona is not simply a devoted surfer, he is a full-time surf bum who has supposedly traveled to all the world’s exotic surfing spots, and he plans to take Moondoggie with him on his next surfing excursion to Peru. As he tells Gidget, “Either there, or Hawaii. You know, gotta follow the sun.” His connection to these exotic, faraway places and cultures is emphasized by the bongos and “Polynesian” masks that adorn his grass beach hut. The Kahoona is, in fact, quite aware that this connection to exotic cultures contributes to the appeal of his surf-bum persona. Near the end of the film, Moondoggie points to a mask and says, “The island of Kauai—see the very place where the natives presented this to the Great Ka-

hoona.” Kahoona, in response, admits, “I bought it in Acapulco for 20 cruddy pesos.”

We are therefore led to believe that the Kahoona’s name and indeed his entire persona are equally fraudulent. This revelation, of course, serves to make Moondoggie’s choice of returning to college and beginning a relationship with Gidget much more acceptable. Yet the necessity for such a seedy revelation itself suggests the appeal of the surf-bum lifestyle; it is as if it might prove too attractive in comparison to suburban, bourgeois life and must therefore be discredited.

Like surf subculture, the surfing films continually draw on the exoticism, wildness, and sexuality that is associated with “other” cultures.²² This is nowhere more true than in the place that these films give to the bikini. The bikini was named by Louis Réard, a French automotive engineer involved in his family’s lingerie business, in the wake of the 1946 atomic test explosions on Bikini Atoll (Operation Crossroads).²³ These tests would in fact continue well into the 1950s, and the bikini’s association with them apparently did nothing to harm its popularity. Indeed, the bikini only began to become popularly accepted in the mid-1950s, after the U.S. had exploded several hydrogen bombs (Code Name Bravo) in the Bikini Atoll chain, obliterating three small islands, thoroughly irradiating Bikini Island, and raining radioactive ash on several neighboring, and populated, chains. Although Réard later claimed that he had named the bikini for the atoll, not the atomic tests, his introduction of the bikini came just four days after the first test made front page news all over the world and gave him the edge on designer Jacques Heim, whose rival design was named, significantly, the *Atome*. The bikini’s association with atomic bombs and testing seems, in fact, to have contributed to its *succès de scandale*, conveying a sense of “explosive,” uncontrolled sexuality while nevertheless retaining the exotic and sexual connotations of life in the “South Seas.”²⁴ Indeed, the bikini-style suit was first popularized in Europe during the 1950s by such “bombshells” as Brigitte Bardot, who was photographed at the 1953 Cannes Film Festival wearing a bikini, and Diana Dors, who appeared at the 1955 Venice Film Festival wearing a mink bikini.²⁵ Shortly after this, with Hollywood stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield photographed wearing low-cut two-piece suits, the bikini-style suit began to become popular with youthful consumers in the U.S. Indeed, by the summer of 1960, it was already popular enough to have inspired teenager Brian Hyland’s number one novelty hit, “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini.”



Beverly Adams, Reginald Gardner, and Mickey Rooney in *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*

Teen-oriented filmmakers were quick to capitalize on this trend, playing on the bikini's exotic and sexually explosive connotations. AIP used "bikini" in the title of three of the seven films in the *Beach Party* series. Posters for *Muscle Beach Party* advertised, "When 10,000 biceps go around 5,000 bikinis, you know what's gonna happen," while those for *Bikini Beach* trumpeted, "It's where the girls are bare-ing, the guys are dar-ing and the surf's rare-ing to go, go, go."

In *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*, this connection between the bikini and the exotic wildness of Pacific Island and other cultures is made even more explicit. The wild bikini of the film's title is introduced through a rather absurd plot device which has Frankie off serving Naval Reserve duty in the "South Seas."²⁶ Lounging under a palm tree with a bikini-topped "Polynesian" woman, he reluctantly rejects her advances because of his obligations to Dee Dee. When the woman, espousing a love-the-one-you're-with philosophy, suggests that Dee Dee is probably cheating on him, he becomes jealous and accepts her suggestion that he visit the local "witch doctor" (Buster Keaton) for help. At Frankie's request, the "witch doctor" dispatches a bikini-clad female spirit designed to draw the attention of any male suitors away from Dee Dee. When this female spirit then appears, she is wearing a leopard-skin bikini.

How to Stuff a Wild Bikini not only derives much of its appeal from the exotic and sexual connotations borrowed from "other" cultures, it also conflates elements of Pacific Island culture with such clearly non-Pacific Island cultural elements as "witch doctors" and leopard skins.²⁷ On the one hand, this conflation points to a rather disturbing exoticism in which all Third World cultures tend to be seen as similarly wild, irrespons-

ble, sexual, and even "primitive." Yet, on the other hand, the fact that these attributes are so frequently associated with surf subculture suggests that they are not simply seen as "other." Or, perhaps more accurately, it suggests the extent to which surf subculture sees itself as "other," as culturally different.

This sense of cultural difference is not, however, based solely on appropriations from Pacific Island culture, but often seems to merge elements from a variety of cultures that are similarly viewed as "wild" or "primitive." These terms are precisely the basis of Harvey Honeywagon's criticism of the sexuality of the surfers' music and dancing, which he sees as "straight out of the jungle": "It's this savage music that stimulates their post-adolescent preoccupation with sex. These children are nothing more than animals." To reinforce his point, he has his trained chimpanzee perform all the stunts that the surfers do, from surfing to drag racing to dancing. The obviously racist implications of Honeywagon's criticisms here echo the attacks on rock-and-roll music by 50s moralists, for whom the African-American roots of rock-and-roll conjured a stereotyped vision of otherness as precisely a matter of wildness, sexuality, savagery, and primitivism.

Nowhere is the sexuality of surf subculture more clearly linked to the exoticized stereotypes of otherness and primitivism than in *Beach Party*. Much of the plot of the film, in fact, revolves around the attempts of "famed anthropologist" R. O. Sutwell—played with convincing naiveté by Bob Cummings—to study the sexual behavior of the surfing subculture, just as he had previously studied that of "primitive" tribes. Treating the surfers as if they were some exotic species of animal, Professor Sutwell begins his study by using a tele-

scope and audio recording devices to observe the surfing crew from the blind of a nearby beach house. When we first see him, he is so engrossed in his observations that he is startled by the entry of his research assistant Marianne (Dorothy Malone). His voyeuristic preoccupations are immediately made clear when Marianne suggests that he is acting like a Peeping Tom. This suggestion that the professor's interests are sexual is reinforced when he tells her the rather academic-sounding title of his new book is *The Behavior Pattern of the Young Adult and its Relation to Primitive Tribes*, and she responds: "You mean, *Teenage Sex*."

For his part, Professor Sutwell denies that his interest in the surfers' sexual behavior is anything other than scholarly. He calls them "a true subculture" and, in what is obviously an allusion to the work of Margaret Mead, describes them as "a society as primitive as the aborigine of New Guinea." He asks Marianne to bring him a number of reference works, including "all of Max Jacobson's works on puberty rites, Merkeson's studies of the Aztec fertility symbols in Spanish Key, coming of age, that sort of thing." Later, he will even go so far as to record a reminder to himself to prepare "a brief footnote" on the comparison of the surfers' "mating rituals" to the "Haitian voodoo ceremony, the Samoan puberty dance, and the mating dance of the whooping crane."

Marianne, however, is not fooled by Professor Sutwell's scholarly facade, nor by his anthropological pretensions of distance from the object of study. She recognizes that the exotic appeal of the surfing subculture, both for Sutwell and for the audience, is profoundly erotic and voyeuristic. Indeed, in an extraordinarily self-reflexive comment, and one that says a good deal about the parodic appeal of the surfing films themselves, she advises Sutwell to "hang onto the picture rights [for his book]; American International will snap it up in a minute."

The Appeal of the "Other"

Without meaning to be glib, I would like to suggest that there is a certain similarity between the position that many film and cultural critics attempt to maintain and that of the anthropologist in *Beach Party*. In arguing, for example, that the appeal of the surfing films is based on a comforting conformity that supports the ideological status quo, such critics take a rather patronizing position, outside or above the conformity of the consumers who are presumed to be the audiences for these films. Like Sutwell, they assume a critical dis-

tance from their object of study that denies their own personal stake, their own personal pleasure, in these films. These critics, like Sutwell, become voyeurs of popular culture, never acknowledging their own investment in the object of criticism. In doing so, moreover, they also deny the extent to which the appeal of these films is based not solely on a desire for conformity, but also on a desire for nonconformity, wildness, otherness.

It would, of course, be easy enough to turn this criticism around and condemn these films not so much for their conformity as for their exoticism. We might well, for example, criticize these films for the way that they appropriate elements of cultural, racial, and sexual otherness for white, middle-class, and largely male consumption without acknowledging the status of these elements as "other." That, however, does not seem to me like a good reason that critics should then repeat this mistake by themselves failing to acknowledge that these elements, however much they have been appropriated and recuperated, are crucial to the appeal of these films. Yet, even if we, as critics, acknowledge that their appeal is based on their appropriation of otherness, can we then simply condemn them for their exoticism? Or must we also condemn their appeal and their pleasure? To do so, it seems to me, not only denies that we, as critics, might find pleasure in these films; it also denies that otherness—whether cultural, racial, or sexual—could have an attraction, an appeal, that is not simply a matter of exoticism, that is not ideologically suspect or complicit.

I would argue that in our haste to condemn the appropriation of otherness, the exoticizing of its appeal, we often give too much credit to the appropriative power of hegemonic discourse while at the same time positioning ourselves outside that power. Even when otherness is appropriated and exoticized, as in the surfing films, this should not mean that these other elements cease to be other, nor that the appeal of these films becomes *simply* a matter of exoticism, racism, sexism. If we are not careful, our criticisms of appropriation and exoticism can become yet another way of refusing to acknowledge otherness, of reducing the Other to the Same.

This is not to argue that we should simply accept the exoticism, racism, and sexism of the surfing films, or that we should not look critically at their appropriations of otherness. I hope that I have, in fact, drawn critical attention to the issue of appropriation, to the question of what might be called "appropriate appropriation." When, or under what circumstances, is the appropriation of otherness "appropriate"? On what basis

should we distinguish between, as bell hooks puts it, “cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation”?

In her essay “Eating the Other,”²⁸ from which I have obviously appropriated the title of this essay, hooks discusses a number of examples of popular culture that involve the appropriation of otherness, including the pleasures and eroticism that are often associated with it. Although she critiques many of these appropriations for upholding ideological stereotypes of exoticism and otherness, she also finds cases where the taking up of “other” cultural elements indicates a willingness “to challenge and disrupt the status quo.” She therefore concludes that the appeal of otherness, if acknowledged and critically explored, need not be automatically condemned as exoticism or as “eating the Other”:

Within a context where desire for contact with those who are different or deemed Other is not considered bad, politically incorrect, or wrong-minded, we can begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations. Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts and makes resistance possible. We cannot, however, accept these new images uncritically.²⁹

There is, of course, much to criticize in the surfing films’ appropriation and representation of the appeal of otherness. No one could deny that these films fail to acknowledge those “others” from whom they appropriate their appeal, that they in fact consistently efface them even while they exoticize and eroticize the appeal of otherness, often playing on the worst stereotypes.

With these criticisms in mind, however, I still want to argue that we should not merely dismiss or condemn these films. First, I would simply note that they frequently parody the exoticized stereotypes of wildness and primitivism that some of their characters associate with surf subculture. In *Beach Party*, Professor Sutwell’s equation of that subculture with “primitive societies” is derided as academic double-talk that masks his own sexual interests, just as his professorial beard masks his own youth. In *Bikini Beach*, Harvey Honeywagon’s stereotyped and racist views of rock-and-roll as sexualized, savage, animalistic, and straight out of the jungle are similarly derided as a moralistic front through which he distances himself from his own pleasure. Perhaps more importantly, I would argue that however much these films appropriate and exoticize the plea-

tures of the “other,” however much they play on the stereotypes of wildness and primitivism, they still present us with the desire of white, middle-class American youth for something different from the status quo. One can, of course, argue that this desire for otherness is merely a way in which the appeal of “other” cultures, races, genders, and even sexualities³⁰ is appropriated while maintaining the privileged status of dominant groups. I would, on the one hand, agree that this argument applies to a large extent to the surfing movies. Yet, on the other (sic), to stop with this argument, to assume that this appropriation and privileging is the whole and only story of these films, is to take a rather pessimistic view of not only these films and their audiences, but of popular culture generally, and of any possibility for ideological change. It is also, too often, a way in which we, as cultural critics, assume an anthropological position of distance from the cultural products and consumers that we study.

I do not, of course, mean to advocate here that film and cultural criticism should simply turn from textual and ideological critique to audience studies, which have their own anthropological pretensions. Rather, I am suggesting that, just as queer readings of culture have pointed to the existence of submerged, but still operative, queer elements, sensibilities, and desires within straight culture, an exploration of the appeal of popular cultural products for their audiences can similarly point to a preexisting, if often overlooked, desire for otherness within mainstream popular culture and its audiences. In acknowledging and exploring the often buried appeal of otherness within the surfing films, and in popular culture generally, we can perhaps better understand how the comforting conformity of these films could coexist with the much more explicit representations of nonconformity, sexuality, and otherness of that time—and of our own time. Rather than simply dismissing these films and their audiences as conformist or appropriative or simply reactionary, we can see in them indications of a desire for something other than ideological conformity. In doing so, we might also begin to see how film and cultural criticism, without abandoning its critical role, could acknowledge its own investment and its own pleasure in even those popular cultural forms that seem most supportive of hegemony, and how it might also acknowledge its own connection to those audiences that it still too frequently sees simply as uncritical, appropriative conformists, dedicated only to the mindless pursuit of reassurance and escape from society’s all-too-obvious problems.

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Notes

1. A 1957 Opinion Research Corporation survey has shown that 72 percent of the moviegoing audience was under 29, and 52 percent was under 20. Cited in Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1976), 375.
2. See, for example, the materials cited in Mark Thomas McFee, *Fast and Furious: The Story of American International Pictures* (Jefferson, N. C.: MacFarland and Co., 1984), 146–153.
3. Cobbett S. Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York: *Facts on File*, 1980), 63–64.
4. Cited in McFee, 144.
5. Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 195.
6. Gary Morris, “Beyond the Beach: Social and Formal Aspects of AIP’s Beach Party Movies,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 (Spring 1993): 5. Actually, *Gidget* was released in March, 1959, but videotapes of the film list the copyright date as 1958, which may account for Morris’s confusion.
7. This sense of a historical time warp is perhaps reinforced by the successful return of Frankie and Annette in 1987’s *Back to the Beach*.
8. Morris, 7.
9. *Ibid.*, 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. There are, however, cases in which beatniks and juvenile delinquents are treated as essentially the same. See, for example, *The Beatniks*, directed by Paul Frees in 1960. A somewhat more unusual case is Roger Corman’s horror/spoof *A Bucket of Blood* (1959), which uses beat culture as a backdrop for its story of a coffee-house busboy who creates amazingly realistic sculptures by covering his victims with clay.
12. Alex McNeil, *Total Television*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 202.
13. Dwayne Hickman, who starred as Dobie Gillis, also appeared in a starring role in *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*.
14. I have taken the chart positions of these hits, and those that follow, from Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* (New York: Billboard Books, 1992).
15. Like Elvis, Boone was quite successful at parlaying his success as a singing and recording star into a movie career, beginning his film career just after Elvis with starring roles in *Bernadine* and *April Love*, both in 1957. Boone was, of course, the prototype for the clean teen, refusing to even kiss a woman in those films. He eventually appeared in 15 films, as well as hosting his own television show from 1957 to 1960.
16. Annette Funicello with Patricia Romanowski, *A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 103.
17. She did, however, appear in a two-piece suit, cut just at the naval.
18. Cited in McFee, 150.
19. As if this were not clear enough, later in *Bikini Beach*, Deadhead, having just been leveled by a woman skilled in French foot-fighting, remarks that “she’s got in her feet what Candy’s got in her . . . hips.” The long pause, during which someone shouts “Surf’s up,” is obviously intended to suggest that Deadhead is about to say something more than “hips.”
20. Dave Marsh and Kevin Stein, *The Book of Rock Lists* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1981), 554.
21. See, for example, the Cyber-Hawaiian Dictionary Online, <http://www.hisurf.com/cgi-bin/DM/dictionary.cgi>.
22. In this context, it is worth noting the place of “other” cultures in Bruce Brown’s famed surfing documentary, *The Endless Summer* (1966), which follows two surfers around the world—from Australia to Africa—in pursuit of the perfect wave. Of note, too, are the brief surfing scenes in Vietnam in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), in which the line, “Charlie don’t surf”—popularized in a song by The Clash—appears.
23. On Operation Crossroads and the Bikini people, see Robert Stone’s documentary, *Radio Bikini* (1987).
24. A note on the 1997 Cannes Festival website (Cannes has been closely associated with the bikini since Brigitte Bardot was photographed at the 1953 festival wearing a bikini) suggests that Réard named the bikini “after the atoll which had been ‘disrobed’ by the American nuclear bomb tests in 1946.” <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/cannes97/50ans/a40c05.html>.
25. Bardot’s appearance in a bikini (and less) in Roger Vadim’s *Et Dieu . . . créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman* [1956]) should also be noted in any history of the bikini and the scandals surrounding it.
26. Presumably, this island is not one of those in the Bikini Atoll chain.
27. One might think that this kind of conflation is a product of 1960s naiveté about other cultures, yet in *The Surfin’ary: A Dictionary of Surfing Terms and Surfspeak* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1991), the following definition appears for Kahuna: “A Hawaiian witch doctor adopted by modern surfers as an imaginary surfing god.”
28. bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21–39.
29. *Ibid.*, 39.
30. Given their emphasis on male groups and their continual exposure of male bodies, the beach or surfing films are particularly open to queer, or at least gay male, readings.