

The A.I.P. Beach Movies - Cult Films Depicting Subcultural Activities

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The legendary Annette Funicello sings six songs from the AIP cult movie [*Beach Party*], along with six other sand-dusted ditties of equal inconsequence. Marvellous junk and, if nothing else, an artefact of the era when the leather-clad Eric Von Zipper ruled Southern California's beaches as no-one else has, before or since. (Dellar, 1997: 122)

Describing "Annette's Beach Party" by Annette Funicello, the companion soundtrack album to *Beach Party* (1963), rock critic Fred Dellar associated this product of 1960s surfing culture with cult fandom. Significantly, the extract originates from the "nuggets", i.e. collectors page of the music magazine *Mojo*, itself a publication aimed primarily at dedicated enthusiasts of "classic rock". An original HMV mono copy of the album costs an estimated £40; an expensive sum for a star who never achieved a hit in Britain. The extract's actual wording also locates the film and Funicello within discourses on cult fandom, placing the movie and album within a specific historical context. Her music and films represent a bygone era, eminently of potential interest for the collectors and readers of *Mojo*. Moreover, Dellar's review contains a contradictory, love-hate tone. Funicello might be "legendary", but her music and films are effectively treated as entertaining kitsch of minimal artistic merit: surely it is paradoxical to write about "marvellous junk"?

Other writers also assume that the A.I.P. (American International Pictures) beach movies belong within the broad generic category of cult movies. The oeuvre of Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon now seemingly belongs in a "bad film" corpus that also includes 1950s monster movies, soft-porn skin flicks and Elvis Presley musicals (Ross, 1989: 155; Sconce, 1995: 371). This categorisation has extended beyond the academy: for instance, the recent death of A.I.P. beach movie star, Deborah Walley, saw *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1965) being described as "a cult classic and a must for those who wallow in sixties surfing nostalgia" (*Independent* - Review Section, 18th May 2001: 6).

Given this unquestioning placement of the beach movies within the cult movie constituency, it seems an appropriate moment to investigate how and why these products of mid-1960s Americana appear rooted within discourses surrounding cult taste and consumption. This article examines whether the films deserve their proclaimed cult status, by negotiating three key areas. First, the A.I.P. series' relationship to mainstream popular culture is considered, concentrating on Dellar's presumption that the movies possess camp, cult and nostalgic qualities. Second, the actual content of the movies and their depiction of the surfing subculture is detailed, negotiating whether the cycle succeeded in acknowledging the customs and subcultural sensibilities of 1960s surfers and A.I.P. viewers. Finally, I consider why the movies failed commercially and critically in 1960s Britain. This emphasis on the British reception of the series permits an opportunity to understand how popular youth movies may fail to translate to international audiences.

Camp, Cult Taste or Nostalgia?

Apart from Presley films, such as *Blue Hawaii* (1961), the beach movie is now primarily associated with the teenage pop musicals produced by A.I.P. during the mid-1960s including *Beach Party*, *Muscle Beach Party*, *Bikini Beach* (both 1964) and *Beach Blanket Bingo*. The importance of these pictures lies with their romanticised vision of Californian youth culture, particularly via their mixture of sun, sea, sand, surf and sex. A definition of the series' intentions emerges with *Record Mail's* review of "Annette's Beach Party":

I suppose that American teenagers do have things like homework, and do get bored, but they are always singing about such wonderful activities as surfing, hot-rodding, holidays in the sun, the pleasures of going steady and the reflection of the moon on the tranquil waters of the Pacific. (Attenborough, 1964: 4)

Within theoretical work on cult movies, it is often claimed that the consumption of such products operates as a self-conscious defiance of notions of quality and good taste. According to Jeffrey Sconce, the development of a cult movie, i.e. "paracinema", sensibility succeeds in operating as "a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus", calculated to incorporate movies formerly derided as "trash" by the arbiters of cultural taste (Sconce, 1995: 372).

For Jonathan L. Crane, watching cult movies "means, for at least an instant, turning your back on seemly or fitting cinema" that offers a genuine alternative to the mainstream" (Crane, 2000: 87). Certainly, critics have not always treated the beach movies with respect. Rick Altman negatively compares the A.I.P. beach movies to the musicals of Elvis Presley, effectively dismissing the films' depiction of surfing, hot-dogs and romance as "totally vacuous" (Altman, 1989: 196). For Philip Jenkinson and Alan Warner, the "awful" *Beach Party* "confirmed all pop lovers' worst fears about the sinking US movie pop scene" (Jenkinson and Warner, 1974: 56). However, it is possibly too facile to automatically categorise the beach movies and their fans as belonging to the cult film phenomenon. To investigate the extent to which they fit into this theoretical framework, three approaches seem particularly pertinent: camp, cultism and nostalgia.

Official notice of the connection between camp and the beach movies emerged in the late 1960s through the comments of British rock critic Nik Cohn. While hardly complimentary about the musical and cinematic legacy of Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon, calling their heyday "the worst period that pop has been through", Cohn at least recognised the possibility of cultural redemption for teen movies previously derided as trash (See also Appendix One):

...this was the time of the Beach Party movies, made by American International and starring such as Tommy Sands, Frankie Avalon, Annette (ex-Mickey Mouse Club Mousketeer) Funicello and Fabian.

These were unchanging epics - there were always a lot of clean cut bodies in bikinis and briefs, a few songs, a few bad jokes, much suntan and sand and water, hundreds of flashing teeth and endless cheerfulness. Seen in retrospect, they're camp and true Pop Art, they say more about Campbell Soup than

Warhol ever did. As 1960 teen entertainments, though, they were nothing but dire. (Cohn, 1996 [1969]: 73)

According to Susan Sontag, camp taste resulted from a desire among (often gay) bohemians and intellectuals to self-consciously embrace bad taste: "The ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful" (Sontag, 1969 [1964]: 293). As hinted earlier, this sensibility seems to permeate *Mojo's* twist on "Annette's Beach Party". Indeed, many reviewers in the mid-1960s apparently regarded the films as examples of "bad" movies. For example, *Muscle Beach Party* was described by *Monthly Film Bulletin* as "[an] indifferently scripted...unfunny and unattractive sequel" (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1966: 62). The film's reputation as an example of the worst form of commercial cinema during the mid-1960s was hardly helped by its dialogue. Lines such as the conversation between DeeDee (Funicello) and Julie, an Italian Contessa (Luciana Paluzzi), on the subject of Frankie's affections can hardly be considered quality scripting:

DeeDee: "What's the matter, did you run out of muscle men?"

Julie: "Oh no! It's just that he looks so sad, like a lost pup".

DeeDee: "Then maybe you didn't notice his license."

Julie: "I didn't even notice his leash".

The beach movies' position as camp films emerges in two other ways. According to Sontag, "many examples of Camp are things which, from a 'serious' point of view are either bad art or kitsch" (Sontag, 1969 [1964]: 280). Chiefly referring to critically despised figures, such as Cecil B. DeMille, and derided film genres like the dubbed Italian superhero epics and Japanese science fiction, she claimed that "bad movies" often achieve such status "because, in their relative unpretentiousness and vulgarity, they are more extreme and irresponsible in the fantasy - and therefore touching and quite enjoyable" (Sontag, 1969 [1964]: 293). The beach movies share certain characteristics with the above mentioned examples of cinematic "trash". First, they are explicitly works of fantasy with no claims to grandiose statements regarding world affairs and the human condition. *Beach Blanket Bingo* contains obvious similarities to the famous folk tale "Cinderella", perhaps the ultimate fantasy story. In the film, the idiotic Bonehead (Jody McCrea) meets a 300-year-old mermaid Lorelei (Marta Kristen), who besides speaking every known language manages to come ashore during the daytime. Therefore, like the Italian muscle man films, the beach movies seem rooted within a fantasy world of myth and legend that never really existed.

Second, as with the other examples of celluloid "trash" mentioned by Sontag, the beach movies do appear to contain elements that fit inside gay culture. Like DeMille's epics and the Italian superhero sagas, there are an extensive number of male, muscular bodies on display. Indeed surfing is a sport which reputedly features "a strong homo-erotic current" (Martin, 2000: 54). Related to this theme, the films frequently refer to the theme of unfulfilled or unconsummated love. Gary Morris comments that throughout the series (heterosexual) love affairs often fail to reach fruition thanks to class and national differences (Morris, 1993: 9). For example, Julie and Ava (Eva Six), the Hungarian "goulash" in *Beach Party* might lust over or love Frankie, but their illicit foreign influence is associated with something threatening and unacceptable. Normal, i.e. American, chaste, heterosexual relations are restored via the renewal of the romance between Avalon and Funicello's characters. Such

comic episodes could easily be read as a metaphor for the condition of gay relationships within society, particularly when repressed due the conventions of heterosexual normality. Interestingly, the appeal of the beach movies was first compared to the Italian epics by *Films and Filming*, a publication that according to Richard Dyer effectively operated as "a closet gay magazine" (Dyer, 1986: 148; Bean, 1964c). Although these pieces of information are important and require further consideration outside of this article, it is possible to overstate the connections between the beach movies, camp taste and gay culture. As I will explain later, the website material related to Annette Funicello remains rooted in wholesome American family values.

Perhaps of greater significance in accounting for current enthusiasm for the beach movies has been the emergence of "paracinema", briefly outlined earlier. Sconce's work owes much to the influence of Pierre Bourdieu's writings on cultural formations. Bourdieu claims that cultural "tastes...are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference" which achieve their significance through the dismissal of other people's value judgements (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). With "paracinema", film fans supposedly define themselves against bourgeois culture and established canons of cinematic taste. An example of this attitude in operation features in a book on *Hollywood Rock*, which claims that *Beach Party* is among the greatest examples of rock'n'roll in the movies and that Avalon possessed fine comic talent:

So-called sophisticates who dismiss these films must realize what they're missing is the beat. *Beach Party* features Dick Dale and his Del-Tones. So does *Beach Party's* follow-up, *Muscle Beach Party*. Do not advance on the later pics until you've seen these beachers, because the continuity of the storyline is important. In *Beach Party*, we get the basic lesson: surf dwellers are a true subculture, and this is what they do....30 years later, *Beach Party* is one of the few places you can still see "hot curl" art, Tiki culture teen clubs, and Dick Dale playing lead guitar on Gary Usher-penned songs like the brilliant "Secret Surfin' Spot". Candy Johnson dances up a storm, Jody McCrea rules as Deadhead, and Harvey Lembeck is preposterous as motor-sickle leader deluxe Eric Von Zipper. Kick open the doors. (Priore in Crenshaw, 1994: 30-31)

This statement seems compatible with Sconce's ideas concerning the politics of oppositional taste. Contributor Domenic Priore denounces the self-appointed guardians of cultural taste for denigrating the humour and zaniness ingrained within the beach movies, thereby supporting preconceptions that A.I.P. fans are engaged in deliberate revisionism of the cinematic canon. In reality Priore's position appears more complex. The cult movie thesis does not adapt particularly well to popular music. While film enthusiasts seeking to disassociate themselves from mainstream deliberately endorse "bad films", music fans often distinguish themselves from modern commercialism through embracing established rock classics, a critically accepted canon patrolled closely by the values disseminated by music writers. With regards to the beach movies, the enthusiasm of rock critics for the series largely revolves around their intertextual musical framework. Critical hierarchies of good taste remain intact ensuring that Priore applauds Gary Usher, a lyricist and collaborator with established critical favourites the Beach Boys and the Byrds. Equally the musical reputations of Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon remain derided, forever associated with the dilution of classic 1950s rock'n'roll rebellion into bland pop. Donald Clarke writes that the arrival of such clean-cut teen idols coincided with a shift to "irritatingly monotonous...saccharine [and] banal" music (Clarke, 1995: 426). Therefore, the real interest of *Muscle Beach Party's* musical soundtrack lies with

songs written by Beach Boys' legend Brian Wilson and an early appearance by Stevie Wonder, both figures who rank highly in the pantheon of modern American songwriters. Wilson has been applauded for his "melodic genius, almost unparalleled in the history of pop" (Hoskyns, 1996: 61), while surf music pioneer Dick Dale (relatively obscure until *Pulp Fiction*) receives acclaim for facilitating surfing's growth as "a recognised sport and the basis for a marketable esthetic [sic]" (White, 1994: 130). No such grandiose acclaim greets Funicello and Avalon. Indeed, there is an implication that their "best ever" musical performances in *Muscle Beach Party* result solely from Wilson's involvement in the film (Larkin (ed.), 1997: 16; Priore in Crenshaw, 1994: 161-162).

This situation illustrates several potential problems with the "paracinema" thesis in conjunction with rock films. First, Priore's comments contain more than a hint that enthusiasts of the beach movies display an interest in music that is considered part of the rock canon. The same almost certainly applies for fans of fifties rock'n'roll flicks and Elvis Presley vehicles. These films might have always been critically neglected as works of cinema, but many of the artists featured in 1950s and 1960s pop musicals are venerated by rock historians as the greatest acts of their generation. This sits uneasily with the idea that cult movie audiences stand against canonical taste: with rock movies, this notion clearly does not hold. Fans of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys who relish *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956) and A.I.P. beach movies are arguably not engaged in "an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection" (Sconce, 1995: 376), but rather cementing their own "good" taste according to the canonical hierarchies evident within rock criticism. Film critic Mark Kermode's review of rock movies even argues that the real significance of such ventures revolves around their musical interludes rather than their dramatic qualities. The status of rock movies as "classic celluloid time-pieces", evidently "representative of a critical moment in youth history...they got the music right, and that was enough", very often connects films' cultural status to the distinguished acts shown in particular productions (Kermode, 1995: 9). Second, as with other forms of popular culture, rock music fans adopt a process of "capital accumulation" (Fiske, 1992: 42-43). According to John Fiske, this process ensures that the elite vanguard of fans attempt to obtain as much information about their favourite stars as possible, in order to distinguish themselves from more casual followers of their icons. With the beach movies, the films therefore serve as an opportunity for the discerning elite to confirm and extend their knowledge concerning the artistic legacies of Brian Wilson and Stevie Wonder. For example, in a footnote to their beach movie chapter, Ehrenstein and Reed claim that "Brian Wilson can be spotted - if you look *real* [italics in original] close - as a background player in *Muscle Beach Party* and one or two of the other films in the AIP 'beach series'" (Ehrenstein and Reed, 1982: 53). Given that "capital accumulation" initiates a process of distinction, such information arguably helps to reinforce cultural hierarchies and canons in popular music rather than establishing a rival system of cultural tastes as the notion of "paracinema" implies.

Equally, among contemporary website and eGroup material relating to Annette Funicello, there is little mention of the camp or "paracinema" appeal of the star. Ironically similarities do exist with oppositional taste through attacks upon those thought to betray the legacy of the beach movies. Bourdieu writes that tastes "are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference", they are "distastes" which effectively condemn the cultural values and lifestyles of others (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). One eGroup correspondent seems typical in seeking to protect the authenticity of *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* (1965) against the machinations of MGM for betraying the film's artistic legacy. The release of the movie on DVD serves as the basis to attack MGM's VHS version which "looks and sounds absolutely lousy" and is further

condemned for its "false advertising". In contrast the digitally remastered version seems faithful to the original conception of the film: "the colors and clarity on the digital remaster are absolutely psychedelic". This fan appoints himself as a defender of the A.I.P. legacy that has been betrayed by the major film studios. What emerges is a battle between the original fan community from the mid-1960s and big business; it represents a confrontation between the self-appointed artistic protectors of A.I.P.'s heritage and the actual owners of the movie's copyright:

Maybe people have complained that Don Rickles and a bunch of musclemen, and Stevie Wonder are NOT in "How To Stuff", even though their pictures are on the DVD box! Further false advertising by MGM after the catalog and website ads for it started out by saying for the last 3 months, "Annette Funicello dons her swimwear in [*How To Stuff a Wild Bikini*]. Anyone who bought it for that reason was certainly disappointed.

At least it looks like they're working on a DVD of *Muscle Beach Party!* The cover shot of Annette with her arms around Dwayne Hickman is really a shot of Annette with her arms around Frankie [Avalon] from *Muscle Beach Party* with Hickman's head superimposed. (<http://www.egroups.com/message/annette/1058>)

Despite the anti-commercial stance of this particular contribution, the predominant tone of both the main Funicello website and eGroup is nostalgia (<http://www.cowtown.net/users/annette/>, www.egroups.com/group/annette). Although Sontag states that the "banal can, with the passage of time become fantastic" (Sontag, (1969) [1964]: 287), this theoretical position seems not to match the actual material available on the Internet. Based on a preliminary search into cyberspace, surprisingly few references to Funicello actually exist on the World Wide Web; indeed the eGroup only contains "100 something members", while more information appears connected with the star's current business interests in the world of luxury teddy bears than her film and musical careers. The most notable website declares itself "Dedicated to Annette Funicello" and offers the chance to "Visit With America's 'Girl Next Door'". It contains numerous reproductions of various photographs, record covers and memorabilia from the 1950s and 1960s. Although unofficial this material adopts a deferential tone with information being lifted straight from the Disney website on Funicello. For instance, the latest career retrospective from Disney features "a tribute to Disney's most beloved Mousketeer and the quintessential all-American teen". This bastion of American capitalism appears determined that Funicello should function as a reminder of the innocent past rather than as an icon of "bad films":

A tribute to Disney's most beloved Mouseketeer and the quintessential all-American teen, Annette captures the innocence of the era through the music and eyes of one of the first female recording stars to consistently crack the Top 40. From her first smash hit "Tall Paul", when she was just 16, to Disney films and television classics and beach movies with Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello came of age on camera and remains America's darling to this day. (<http://www.cowtown.net/users/annette/afcdset.htm>)

A similarly deferential tone features throughout the eGroup discussions centred around Funicello. Debates focus upon two principal areas. First, the star's current battle against multiple sclerosis ensures that the eGroup network serves as a support network for families of other sufferers of the disease. Nostalgia forms the members' other key interest. The Internet

provides the means for fans interested in collecting memorabilia connected with the star. Various items including videos, records, CDs and autographed photographs are placed for sale. Regular updates are featured regarding television broadcasts of the beach movies and other Funicello related items. Surprisingly, detailed reminiscences of the 1950s and 1960s do not feature particularly prominently, although many fans are obviously nostalgic for the past: "I'm 47 and have also been a fan since *The Mickey Mouse Club* - I wanted to grow up to be just like her!:- (I even have several old vinyl albums of her songs from way back when...;-)" (<http://www.egroups.com/message/annette/1052>). Equally the material described earlier relating to *How To Stuff A Wild Bikini* hints that Funicello's original fans still judge the beach movies according to 1960s cultural values, a preference typified by the preference for widescreen authenticity and psychedelic colours.

This means that the "bad taste" culture encouraged by the camp and "paracinema" sensibilities would appear to have little influence upon the Funicello fans engaged on the Internet. Of course, it remains virtually impossible to fully investigate these oppositional stances among web browsers and eGroup members, because the appropriate empirical data required to understand the social backgrounds and cultural values of these Funicello fans simply does not exist. It is quite possible that the opinions expressed by some of the egroup members originate from camp and "paracinema" perspectives, but nostalgia provides the prevalent tone of much of this multimedia material. This mood does not present Funicello as an icon of "bad" movies, but as an all-American sweetheart. Disney, the epitome of wholesome family values appears determined to present the star "as a legend" in the studio's history (<http://www.cowtown.net/users/annette/Anniebio>). Nowhere in the website material or through the egroup discussions does any argument emerge which might fundamentally challenge this official saccharine vision of Funicello. Her films and music are discussed by fans as works of quality rather than as forms of "bad taste". This does not present a vision of "a deviant taste public disengaged from the cultural hierarchies of their overarching taste culture" (Sconce, 1995: 376), but rather displays a compliance with and enthusiasm for mainstream popular culture. Fans of cult movie stars do not necessarily endorse the camp or "paracinema" position; indeed many may not even be aware of their hero/heroine's place within the ranks of "trash" icons. This has implications for further studies regarding the inter-relationship between cult film and popular music, particularly with regards to rock movies and their audiences.

Surfing and A.I.P. Beach Movies As Subcultural Products

The above material hints at the cult status of the beach movies. Certainly, the fan writings on the Internet, along with the work of professional enthusiasts like Priore, do appear to meet the theoretical definitions offered by Graeme Harper and Xavier Mendik. The fans certainly talk about the movies "in an informed manner brought about by many hours of watching and discussion" of the cultural landscape in which the films were produced and continue to inhabit through television, video and new media outlets (Harper and Mendik, 2000: 7). However, given that the beach movies originated from the surfing subculture of the early-mid 1960s, the series arguably always attempted to articulate the values of this community. This section investigates whether these subcultural origins might have facilitated the movies' durability as cult products.

Youth subcultures have traditionally been represented as being "identifiably different" from parental culture. According to Clarke et.al., such socio-cultural movements "must be focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which

significantly differentiate them from the wider culture" (Clarke et.al., 1976: 13-14). Although this interpretation of British post-war youth subcultures over-stressed the degree of deviancy evident within many youth movements, its emphasis on the importance of separate teenage cultural codes contains significance for this study. The Californian surfing craze represented by the beach movies depicted subcultural activities through language and customs that could only have been appreciated by people aware of these cultural codes. Pierre Bourdieu writes that the appreciation of particular cultural products depends upon the ability of the recipient to appreciate the intended message of the text:

A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial and musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a period, a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason. (Bourdieu, 1993: 116)

Considering that surfing retains popularity as an elite leisure activity to this day, the importance of the films as subcultural products should not be underestimated. Full appreciation of the movies has always required viewers to deploy their own cultural knowledge of surfing and A.I.P. itself; without such cultural capital the films can appear virtually unintelligible.

It is important to stress that the lifestyle depicted by the beach movies always contained elements associated with subcultural distinction. According to an early British profile on surfing, a Californian teenager residing in Britain, Alan Griffiths, unconsciously hinted at the elitism of the culture:

"Surfing is not a sport - it is a cult as strict as any religious one Actual surfing is not the only part of the cult though - there is all the social life, all the beach parties and the actual distinction of being a surfer. And it gets the girls in Southern California - the best place for surfing in North America". (*Record Mail*, October 1963: 6)

This distinction occurs in two ways during the films. First, the surfers employ a certain subcultural language that is unintelligible to those unaware of their culture. For example, Dick Dale and the Del-Tones' "Secret Surfin' Spot" from *Beach Party* refers to "hot-dogging on my board until the sun goes down", while this secluded surfing paradise remains unique because it is situated where "the gremmies and the hooters never go". The beach serves as the classic location for exercising subcultural difference. Surf culture is presented as being unavailable to "gremmies", motor cyclists such as the buffoon-like Eric Von Zipper (Harvey Lembeck) the surfers' bumbling enemy in numerous A.I.P. films, and "gremmies" defined by Griffiths as kids under fifteen who are "looked upon with amusement, and are definitely not allowed in with the surf" (*Record Mail*, October 1963: 6). Other films are full of surfing terminology such as "waxing our boards", "cowabunga", "jazz the glass", "real hotdogger", and to "catch/shoot/sneak a wave". Besides this, real-life surfing locations are explicitly alluded to in songs, Balboa, in *Beach Party's* theme tune, and Muscle Beach through the very title of *Muscle Beach Party*. These references are intended to increase the subcultural capital

of viewers interested in surfing. Yet by acknowledging the surfing subculture, they effectively disenfranchise audiences unacquainted with such specialised knowledge (Appendix Two).

Second, the behaviour of the teenagers seems designed to expressing subcultural difference. According to Sarah Thornton, teenage subcultures provide "a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not autonomous members of an undifferentiated mass" (Thornton, 1995: 10). With regards to the beach movies this claim has much truth, but needs some revising. Although the characters played by Avalon and Funicello do not differ significantly in terms of their beach attire or behaviour from the rest of the youngsters, it is their very status as stars that differentiates them from the other actors. For example, their privileged position is very obvious in the opening frames of *Muscle Beach Party*, where Frankie and Annette ride separately ahead of the rest of the gang. Equally many of the figures on the beach are merely symbolic decorations who are never given any agency to express their dramatic abilities. However any examination of the beach movies also reveals that they place special premium on exerting social and cultural distinction. *Beach Party*, *Muscle Beach Party* and *Beach Blanket Bingo* all feature comic confrontations with other subcultural groups who define themselves against the surfers, principally Von Zipper's bikers and Jack Fanny's (Don Rickles) band of muscle men. In each film some form of climactic battle takes place which effectively represents an attempt for each subculture to operate in what their members perceive to be their rightful space. In *Muscle Beach Party*, the muscle men physically assault the surfers, using their opponents to create a dividing line between the various areas of the beach. Von Zipper declares in *Beach Blanket Bingo* that his job is to protect teen idol Sugar Kane (Linda Evans) from "them rotten surfers" and "beach bums that don't work". Although intended to be comic, these scenes do explain how teen movies intended for subcultural audiences sought to express perceived social and cultural differences on screen. Perhaps ironically the films appeal to today's cult movie audiences interested in maintaining their own cultural individuality because they always appeared preoccupied with issues related to cultural and social distinction.

The third key aspect of the beach movies lay with the ability of the films to present an idyllic and luxurious vision of American youth culture. Although principally associated with the pop songs of the Beach Boys, beach movie culture did seemingly conjure up escapist images of teenage life. Two aspects featured heavily within beach movie iconography, both within the films and their attendant publicity: the sport of surfing and the bikini. Both characteristics were prominent in an article from the film fan magazine *Photoplay* that details the star profiles of several A.I.P. hopefuls engaged on a promotional tour of Britain known as the "Starburst of Youth". The stars' hobbies and physique subscribe to the myths and stereotypes associated with Californian youth culture. Nearly every participant involved with the A.I.P. promotional venture is described as enjoying surfing or other healthy outdoor sports, such as water-skiing, tennis and swimming. For example, Patti Chandler was described as: "Always a sun-worshipper and a water sports enthusiast", while "attractive Susan Hart" was reported as "essentially an out-doors girl, she excels in ski-ing, surfing and horseback riding" (McAsh, 1965: 52). These typical "surfer girls" are described in a style that UK audiences would have recognised as being synonymous with surfing culture. The article suggests that sporting and physical prowess, together with actual career success were available to those whose personalities and attributes matched the myths of surfing culture.

Confirmation of this occurs through the actual presentation of the female hopefuls in the article. This fully elucidates the connections between physical appearance and conformity

towards a particular dress code via McAsh's descriptions of the "starlets" involved with the "Starburst of Youth" tour and their supporting photographs. As *Record Mail's* review of "Annette's Beach Party" illustrated earlier, the American Dream as filtered through the A.I.P. movies offered a correlation between sporting aptitude and physical attractiveness. In the words of beach movie director, William Asher, "our audiences welcome clean sex....They're bored with juvenile delinquents" (Quoted in Hoskyns, 1996: 59). The photography featured in the article exacerbates this sexualisation of the female hopefuls involved in the "Starburst of Youth". Of the five actresses only Luree Holmes fails to wear the bikini, the virtual national costume of Californian women. Therefore, it is not altogether surprising that all of the women featured in the written part of the article are connected with beauty contests, modelling or surfing. Comments such as "a vivacious 22-year old blond with the eye-popping measurements of 38"-22"-35"" and "a vivacious 22-year-old beauty who won a bikini contest conducted for A.I.P.'s *Bikini Beach*" described Bobbi Shaw and Patti Chandler. "A successful modelling career" provided the passport to fame for Mary Hughes, Salli Sachse, Jo Collins and Sue Hamilton (McAsh, 1965: 52-53).

Finally, the subcultural status of the beach movies is enhanced by their degree of self-referentiality and knowingness. This appears calculated to appease fans of the entire A.I.P. output through emphasising cultural codes available to audiences with an expert knowledge of the company's heritage. Morris states that through their formal inconsistencies, the cycle appears "about as self-reflexive as they come, [but] they are not as high in self-awareness", suggesting that the studio did not appear interested in "serious self-criticism" (Morris, 1993: 11). This judgement is overtly critical: to expect an avant-garde style dissection of the film industry in a teenage pop musical represents an unrealistic aim. The likes of *Beach Party* and *Muscle Beach Party* make a constant stream of light-hearted jokes at the expense of their stars and A.I.P. itself that place special premium upon their audience's awareness of what exactly the text represents.

This process of subcultural distinction via self-awareness relies upon the acquisition of minute pieces of information that appear unavailable to those unable to discern such codes. With the beach movies this operates in three ways. First, as stated earlier, the films are loaded with references to the surfing subculture, something that has permitted their status as cultist products for audiences from the 1960s onwards. Second, the series never completely disguises its artificiality. The best example of this occurs in a scene from *Beach Party*, where Professor Sutwell (Bob Cummings) spies on the beach dwelling teenagers for his latest anthropological project into youth behaviour patterns. His clumsy attempts to distance himself from accusations of voyeurism results in his assistant Marianne (Dorothy Malone) uttering a very knowing response: "hang on to the picture rights American International will snap it up in a minute". This presents a clear awareness from the movie's producers regarding their own apparent willingness to endorse teenage trends. A.I.P.'s success lay with their ability to respond quickly to the changing fashions of American youth culture. Like Sutwell, Arkoff and Nicholson were adult outsiders, cinematic anthropologists desperately seeking an insight into the contemporary values and tastes of teenagers. For people who watch *Beach Party* aware of the studio's history of exploiting the latest teenage trends, Malone's joke continues to offer a sly critique of the intentions of Sutwell and A.I.P. It demonstrates the company's willingness to laugh at their own intentions besides indicating that adults did have a vested interest in the teenage community. Particularly for modern day viewers, an appreciation of such humour results from an acquaintance with A.I.P.'s own history. The joke remains, and possibly always was, alien to those audiences lacking the cultural competence required for understanding the film.

Third, the beach movies contain references to other popular A.I.P. cycles. Morris observes that "other A.I.P. films, including the Poe series are blatantly plugged" (Morris, 1993: 10). This inter-textual acknowledgement between A.I.P.'s production cycles and their audience emerges in two explicit ways. First, veteran performers who appeared in the studio's other films made regular guest appearances in the beach movies. For example, Vincent Price and Peter Lorre, both closely associated with the Corman/Poe horror cycle made special appearances in *Beach Party*, *Muscle Beach Party* and *Bikini Beach*. A.I.P. films actually advertised other studio products that the company believed would interest their audience. The beach movies incorporated lengthy and elaborate closing credit sequences that created opportunities for the studio to thank the stars, while informing audiences about suitable future viewing. For example, *Beach Party* closes with the dedication "Special thanks to Vincent Price as Big Daddy" before cutting to a final frame complete with a sinister looking haunted house which states that the actor is "soon to be seen in Edgar Allen Poe's *Haunted Palace*". More obviously, *Beach Blanket Bingo* reminds viewers about the series' next instalment: "Get ready for the next Beach blast...*How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*...". In each case, the company presumed the presence of a distinct cult following. They believed that enthusiasts for the Poe horrors would appreciate the beach movies; the exploits of Frankie and Annette were deliberately designed to appeal to existing A.I.P. audiences who might not necessarily have appreciated surfing and pop music.

This extends into a discussion of the second major inter-textual aspect of the beach movies. The films are inseparable from A.I.P.'s heritage, making constant allusions to the studio's history. Inter-textual references appear designed to encourage fans to compare the beach movies with other A.I.P. pictures. The best example of this tendency occurs in *Beach Party* through Price's role as the mythical Big Daddy. This iconic figure merely snoozes in the corner of a surfers' diner. In awe of his reputation, the teenagers wait for Big Daddy to utter "the word", a supposedly profound justification of his powers. At the end of the movie, "our beloved leader" offers his manifesto which on first acquaintance sounds like nonsense: "The pit: bring me my pendulum kiddies, I feel like swinging". This undoubtedly pokes fun at Price's role in movies like *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961) which are lost upon any viewer unaware of the connections between the various strands of A.I.P. production. These messages seem important for both the contemporary 1960s subcultural audience for the movies and today's cult followers of the studio. In the context of the film's initial release such information probably helped to cement the bond between the company and its audience; Price's presence provided reassurance that the new series would not deviate completely from A.I.P. traditions. For modern day viewers of *Beach Party*, such in-jokes increase the potential for distinction. Those aware of the full range of cultural codes concerning A.I.P. films arguably possess the greater range of tools required for cultural competence. The pop musical or horror enthusiasts who respectively ignore the Poe cycle and the beach movies arguably lack the inter-textual references deemed crucially important by the arbiters of taste in these areas of fandom.

The Beach Movies in Britain

MacAsh's article is notable for three reasons. Its exploration of the myths surrounding surfing and American youth culture and the production practises of A.I.P. have already been detailed. This section concentrates on the third area: why the "Starburst of Youth" campaign, the A.I.P. beach movies failed commercially in Britain.

The scarcity of the beach movies in Britain has undoubtedly contributed to their cult status. They are hardly ever shown on terrestrial television, while they are unavailable on video or

DVD in Britain. Crucially, at the time of their initial release, the commercial viability of the films was hindered by three factors. First, like other A.I.P. products in Britain, the beach movies were effectively restricted to supporting features/double bills with other pop films. For example, *Bikini Beach* was teamed with the Dave Clark Five vehicle *Catch Us If You Can* (1965) (*N.M.E.* advert, July 23, 1965: 4). This confirmed their position as the sort of minor films that could easily pass unnoticed by British audiences. Moreover, the films were poorly distributed in Britain: *Beach Party* arrived a year after its American release, while *Muscle Beach Party* and *Pajama Party* (1964) emerged two years later across the Atlantic. Interestingly, the later parts of the series, including *Beach Blanket Bingo* and *How the Stuff a Wild Bikini* failed to obtain a British cinema release, serving as a testimony to the films' inability to reach a British audience.

Secondly, as discussed earlier, the beach movies attracted negative critical comments from the outset. This disapproval of the films coincided with the prevailing critical discourses at the time in Britain. For example, *Sight and Sound* editor Penelope Houston appeared disgusted by the entire process of making films for the teenage market, directly equating "the shoddiness of a lot of entertainment film-making" with producers aiming "to gauge what teenagers want, and making some strident or pitiful or plainly silly bids for their attention" (Houston, 1963: 176). With certain exceptions, such as the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), few commentators displayed sympathy for the teenage pop musical. For example, working within a similar thematic area to the Funicello/Avalon series, Elvis Presley's stream of glossy, technicolor, escapist musicals met with a great deal of critical hostility (Caine, 2000: 176-185). Considering this context, it becomes easier to account for the initial critical disdain of the beach movies. Although *Beach Party* received slightly unexpected praise from *Monthly Film Bulletin* for "its attractive visual sheen" and "friendly, lightly satirical tone" (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1964: 133), this acclaim proved short-lived. A revealing insight into the critical disapproval for the beach movies occurs through *Monthly Film Bulletin's* comments on *Pajama Party*:

Possibly there is a big gap between American and British teenagers, but it is hard to visualise the latter appreciating any of the deliberately disparate elements in this painful film. The pop songs are feeble, the black-leather-gang parody is too completely divorced from reality, the Sci-Fi element doesn't get off the ground, and the numerous near-nude teenage parties are utterly synthetic in their exuberance. [Director] Don Weis has a smooth way with action, but can make nothing of the chaotic narrative, the lethally unfunny running gags, and the insipid love scenes. It is sad to see the still-glamorous Dorothy Lamour warbling a burlesque of her own type of singing, and Buster Keaton labouring nobly and at length with the ghastly role of a moronic Red Indian. Still, he appears to be enjoying a Keystone Cops chase, even if Sennett would have done it ten times better. (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1966: 62-63)

Many critics compared films either positively or negatively according to the cinematic canon, those "typical works" that represented the best examples of popular film. Pop musicals were "consciously or unconsciously" approved or condemned because they either endorsed or refused "the qualities more or less explicitly recognized as pertinent in a given system of classification" (Bourdieu, 1984: 52). In the case of the beach movies, the presence of veteran performers such as Buster Keaton merely confirmed the distaste for such pop films as musical comedies. Through consciously or unconsciously comparing the likes of *Pajama*

Party to the established film classics of silent comedy and the Hollywood musical, contemporary reviewers ensured that they lacked the appropriate critical framework required to understand the subcultural meanings of the beach movies to their target audience.

In this sense, teen movies were taken to represent a form of "dumbing down" of the artistic potential of the cinema. *Films and Filming's* Robin Bean believed that the "churning out [of] formula pictures till they reach the point of diminishing returns" appeared symptomatic of the desperation of producers to attract young people to the cinema at a time of falling audiences (Bean, 1964b: 12). Reviewing *Beach Party*, Bean commented that "somewhere a teenage romance of sorts (which seems to be more like a feud) is being carried on by Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello which no doubt will last for many movies to come" (Bean, 1964a: 22). His observation proved to be correct, as the Avalon/Funicello on/off romance lasted for the series' entire duration.

Finally, the beach movies failed commercially in Britain because teenagers did not require their idyllic vision of American life. The mid-1960s arguably marked the apogee of British popular music through the "beat boom", headed by artists such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Why would British pop fans have any need to see Funicello and Avalon, neither of whom had achieved significant chart success in Britain, in *Beach Party* during August 1964, when they possessed the opportunities to experience both *A Hard Day's Night* and Cliff Richard in *Wonderful Life* (1964)? Cliff is the crucial figure in explaining the A.I.P. movies' failure in Britain, and, along with Presley, the prime exponent of the beach movie to British audiences. Not only did he occupy a similar boy-next-door teen idol role to that held by Avalon in America from c.1958/59, but also Cliff starred in glossy, escapist, technicolor musical comedies not a million miles away from the A.I.P. beach movie formula (Caine, 2000: 298-305). *Summer Holiday* (1962) and *Wonderful Life* are British beach movies designed for domestic consumption, while similar glossy travelogues featured not only in the Beatles' *Help!* (1965), but also through that agent of "swinging sixties" Britishness James Bond. In these circumstances, it does not appear surprising that the music paper, *Music Echo* could boast in 1965 "that British pop films have the edge over the American" (Harry, 1965: 9). Ultimately, perhaps the reason why British critics, such as Dellar and Jenkinson and Warner, fail to treat the beach movies as anything other than kitsch nonsense, results from the fact that they resembled obscure curiosities from the moment of their initial release in Britain. During the mid-1960s, the A.I.P. beach movies were irrelevant in Britain: if Cliff Richard famously failed in America, Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon failed in Britain, as neither country wanted or required the other nation's chief representatives of non-deviant teenage culture.

Conclusion

The A.I.P. beach movies today represent a fascinating insight into a now distant youth culture: the innocence, and perhaps the optimism, of mid-1960s surfing hedonism can probably never be recaptured. Today's characters in equivalent US youth movies smoke, drink, take drugs and have sex. In this context, films such as *Clueless* (1995), the *Scream* franchise (1996-2000) and *American Pie* (1999) would appear to have little in common with the beach movies. In reality, they share conspicuous similarities. First, present-day teen movies are mediated, commercialised impressions of youth culture. By necessity, films aimed at the youth market are ephemeral productions designed to capture a particular historical moment by offering a balance between the teenage existence and parent culture (Lewis, 1992: 4; Hay, 1990: 336). This ensures that sympathetic treatments of teenage life often coincide

with moralistic, seemingly adult-imposed attitudes. Such a condition applies not only to the beach movies but also to modern youth films - witness the combination of sentimentality, sexism and morality evident in *Scream*. Second, American teen movies still largely revolve around wealthy white, suburban, middle class characters, largely free from serious economic and social problems. Cher's luxurious Beverly Hills existence in *Clueless* is arguably equally utopian, escapist and unreal when compared to the everyday lives of many teenagers as the beach frolics of Frankie and Annette would have seemed during the 1960s. In these circumstances, perhaps it should not appear coincidental that Funicello's rise from "Mickey Mouse Club" child star to clean cut, pop singer is shared by today's leading teen idol, Britney Spears. Historical and social changes, such as increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex, account for the changing presentations of youth between the 1950s/60s and the present. Overall the dominant image of the teen star, on screen and via popular music, remains the non-deviant, middle class, fun-loving teenager established by the likes of Funicello, Avalon, Fabian, Pat Boone, Sandra Dee and, in Britain, Cliff Richard over forty years ago.

The beach movies also contain lessons for scholars examining the cult movie phenomenon. The "paracinema" thesis appears better suited to sub-groups of the cult movie, such as the 1950s horror film, low-budget exploitation cinema and soft-pornography, because these types of production seem more marginal within popular culture and regimes of taste than rock movies. This paper has suggested that pop films do not easily coincide with the presumed oppositional status of cult movies. Of course, popular music remains a potent means of generational and taste difference, but there seems a definite correlation between consumption of pop musicals and an enthusiasm for the rock canon. In these circumstances, I would suggest that the beach movies, along with other rock films, actually help to reinforce notions of "quality" and "good taste" through their use of distinguished musicians and songwriters.

Critics should be wary of assuming that because a film receives cult status all of the fans of this movie necessarily adopt "paracinema" or oppositional viewing strategies. This study clearly indicates that many American beach movie fans deliberately avoid any mention of camp or cultism with regards to Funicello; judging by the Internet material, the star remains a figure of mainstream, wholesome American values rather than a "trash" icon. Under these circumstances, perhaps the A.I.P. beach movies should be reconsidered as *mainstream* productions, not dissimilar to other zany, escapist comedies of the mid-1960s, such as Presley musicals, *Help!*, *Cat Ballou* (featuring beach movie alumni Dwayne Hickman and Michael Callan), *The Great Race* (both 1965) and the television series *Bewitched*, incidentally produced/directed by regular beach movie director William Asher. This would enable scholars to understand the trend towards zaniness during a particular historical period, while emphasising the similarities/contrasts between alternate productions. However, that is a task that belongs to another project. Certainly, for many fans, the beach movies have never been anything other than examples of mainstream American popular culture, something that scholars of cult movies and their audiences should note.

Appendix One

Cohn's work (as he admits in his preface to the 1996 edition of *Awopbopalooobop Alopbamboom*) contains numerous inaccuracies. For example, he seems confused between Tommy Sands and Tommy Kirk, Funicello's ex co-star at Disney, who (unlike Sands) did appear in A.I.P. beach movies. Moreover, his sense of chronology is misleading: the A.I.P. beach movies were made between 1963 and 1966 rather than c.1960 as implied.

Appendix Two

Ironically, the movie and its apparent commercialisation of their lifestyle reportedly disgusted authentic Californian surfers. Priore writes that:

Real California surfers attending the premiere of *Beach Party* turned away in disgust. Such a criminal misrepresentation was considered a desecration of everything they held sacred. Things got so bad in the theater that Malibu legend (and surfing stuntman) Mickey Dora released a jar of moths, which promptly covered the screen. (Priore in Crenshaw, 1994: 31)

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