

# 'Just the lemon next to the pie': Apocalypse, History and the Limits of Myth in *Big Wednesday* (1978)

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Sport has the power to evoke issues of nationalism and gender for, as Boyle and Haynes note:

Mediated sport is saturated with ideas, values, images and discourses which at times, reflect, construct, naturalize, legitimize, challenge and even reconstitute attitudes which permeate wider society. (Boyle and Haynes, 2000: 111)

John Milius's *Big Wednesday* (1978) is more than just a film about surfing, it is an evocation of American society's hopes, fears and conflicts between 1962 and 1974. *Big Wednesday* tells the story of three surfers, Matt Johnson (Jan Michael Vincent), Jack Barlow (William Katt) and Leroy Brown (Gary Busey), 'the three kings' of 'The Point', a fictional Malibu beach. Each of 'the three kings' is a surfer 'type': Matt, the star surfer of the Point, is the natural leader of the three; Jack is the clean-cut, blonde, conforming all-American surfer and Leroy, nicknamed 'the Masochist', is a typical 'surf mongrel' (Jarrett, 1978: 7).

The film opens in 1962 with the friends throwing parties, brawling and having fun. Grim reality invades their existence when they take a trip to Tijuana where Matt learns his girlfriend is pregnant, Leroy marries and abandons a girl and a bar room brawl ends in death. This disastrous American foray into foreign parts is an ominous precursor of the Vietnam War, which overshadows the remaining narrative. The increasing alienation of Matt, Jack and Leroy is shown when a drunken Matt causes a car crash on the highway adjoining the beach. Jack, now a lifeguard, orders Matt off the beach. Their mentor, The Bear, a surfboard maker (known as a shaper in surf culture) advises Matt that friends should stick together, despite bad behaviour. This admonition becomes the theme that holds the narrative together for it is friendship, particularly male friendship, which is represented as all-important in surfing.

The friends differing attitudes to life are clear from the beginning of the film. Matt surfs mainly because he enjoys being with his friends. He dislikes the commercialism that seems to be creeping into surfing and is honest enough to admit his unsuitability as a role model for younger surfers. Jack tends to be associated with institutionalised power and control. His first job is as a lifeguard -- the policeman of the beach. Leroy is unstable, uncaring of what people think and at times prone to violence. The differences between the friends are demonstrated when they receive their draft papers. Jack is the only one to go without demur whilst Matt and Leroy successfully avoid going to Vietnam. Matt deliberately has his leg injured and Leroy is so convincingly mentally unstable that he is carried off to the local asylum. Their friend Waxer is not so lucky. He is drafted and falls in battle. The friends meet in a cemetery in a scene reminiscent of the opening sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* (1999) in which, amidst rows of graves they give Waxer a proper surfer's wake, telling stories and getting drunk. Finally, Matt, Jack and Leroy come together one last time to surf the apocalyptic Big

Wednesday wave, prophesied at the beginning of the film by The Bear. This last ride enables them to wash away the pain of Vietnam, and relive Malibu of the early sixties before parting.

*Big Wednesday* is writer/director John Milius' homage to surf culture and a nostalgic reflection of a vanished era in which Malibu, like America, was carefree, optimistic and believed itself invincible. Milius was one of the second wave of highly influential young directors in the 1970s, which included Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg, who came to symbolize 'New Hollywood'. 'New Hollywood' directors, "were unembarrassed to assume the mantle of the artist, nor did they shrink from developing personal styles that distinguished their work from that of other directors" (Biskind, 1998: 15). Biskind describes 'New Hollywood' films as character rather than plot driven, "often films without heroes, without romance, without anyone to 'root for'" (Biskind, 1998: 17). Certainly *Big Wednesday* fits this description as there is no real hero or antagonist nor is there much romantic interest as women are relegated to the background in favour of masculine friendship. Much was expected of *Big Wednesday* as Biskind notes, "*Big Wednesday* was supposed to put Milius on the map. He was Mr. Surfer, and if anyone could capture that scene, it was presumably Milius" (Biskind, 1998: 340). In an interview prior to the film's release, Milius too seemed to expect much of the film, describing it as the, "How Green Was My Valley", the loss of an aristocracy, the end of an era" (Jarrett, 1976:14). Surfers also believed that the film would give an accurate representation of surf culture on film. Milius, a surfer from the Malibu era, co-wrote the script with Denny Aarberg from an original story, 'No Pants Mance' published by Australian surfing magazine *Tracks* in 1972.

Despite these credentials the film was a flop and was unfavourably reviewed. In *The New York Times* review, for instance, Janet Maslin wrote, "*Big Wednesday* isn't even a tiny fraction of what it was once cracked up to be" (Maslin, 1978:14). Maslin however, displayed her ignorance of surf culture by pronouncing that the film did not even include music by the Beach Boys or Jan and Dean whom, she argued were, "just as deeply in love with the sport as Mr. Milius" (ibid). Maslin obviously did not know that in the sixties the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean were regarded, particularly by American surfers, as epitomising the exploitation of the sport.

Since its release, *Big Wednesday* has been neglected by critics and mainstream cinema alike, relegated to the ranks of the 'cult' film, no more than a quirky curiosity. Surfers, however, continue to hold the film in high regard as demonstrated by the number of surf shops called 'Big Wednesday', the popularity of Bear surfboards and accessories and its inclusion in many surf shops alongside definitive surfing film classics such as *The Endless Summer* (1964) and *Crystal Voyager* (1973).

*The Endless Summer* and *Crystal Voyager* are examples of what Booth (1996) classifies as 'pure' surf films. 'Pure' surf films are produced by surfers for surfing audiences from the 1950s until the advent of surf videos in the early 1980s lead to their demise. An example of this type of film is the 'pure' surf film, *Liquid Dreams* in *Big Wednesday* in which Matt stars. The audience reaction of shouting and whistling is typical of a surf audience (Beattie, 2003).

It might be argued that *Big Wednesday* falls between Hollywood mainstream films with a beach background and 'pure' surf films for it is produced for a surfing and mainstream audience as a big Hollywood film, yet retains the authenticity of a surfer-produced text. This authenticity may account for its inclusion in video collections in surf shops. It may be argued

that the way Milius mythologizes the surfer lifestyle, the act of surfing and the ocean are the main reasons for surfers' enduring fondness for *Big Wednesday*.

The centrality of space and the meanings associated with the ocean, specifically in the myth of the perfect wave in *Big Wednesday*, emulates themes of pure surf films and magazines. As Scheibel (1995) notes, "Ideas of surfing perfection are disseminated to members of surf culture through a variety of surfing magazines. The myth of the 'perfect wave' is a recurring theme, and is represented photographically through images that constantly affirm the ideological premise, 'one man, one wave'" (Scheibel, 1995: 256).

Fiske (1983) examines the interaction of culture with space in his semiotic analysis of the beach in which he identifies the cultural myths marking the differences between land and sea. Fiske uses Levi-Strauss' notions of the ways in which culture makes meaning of nature through myths, arguing "nature is a cultural product, and nature exists only as a conceptual opposition to culture" (Levi-Strauss, 1994; Fiske, 1983: 121). The beach, placed between land and sea, constitutes a liminal space which negotiates the opposing elements of land and sea:

*FISKE'S NOTION OF THE BEACH AS ANOMALOUS CATEGORY*

A	Anomalous category	B
SEA NATURE NAKED	Beach	LAND CULTURE CLOTHED
SWIMMING	Surfboard	BOATING MAN

(adapted from Fiske, 1983: 131)

The sea, raw and uncontrolled, is associated with nature in opposition to the land, which is ordered and controlled by people in cities and towns. The beach, which takes on both natural and cultural associations of the sea and land is a space, "that has too much meaning, an excess of meaning potential, that derives from its status as anomalous" (Fiske, 1983: 120). The beach therefore forms a site in which the boundaries between nature and culture are constantly blurred. The representations of surfing and surfers are also affected by the binary of nature/culture. This is particularly evident in the construction of American surfing through discourses from the early twentieth century.

**The Discursive Construction of American Surfing**

American surfing in the 1960s was constructed through a number of discourses including globalization, consumerism, nationalism and tourism. Surfing originated in the Pacific Islands and is principally associated with Hawaii. The myth of Hawaii as paradise on earth is continuously reflected in representations of surfers and surfing throughout the early part of surf history up to the 1970s. Hawaiian tourism, which developed in the nineteenth century,

was predicated on a myth of exoticism, hedonism and a return to Eden as opposed to the squalor of modernity and urban life (Farrell, 1982). Surfing was central to this myth as it symbolised a pre-tourist Hawaiian lifestyle of licentiousness and sexuality encapsulated within pre-Christian practices of the *kapua* religious and caste system (Olsen: 1989). Under this system surfing was part of a ritualistic and class culture in which commoners were allowed only to surf shorter boards and only on specific waves. Surfing was also often associated with gambling and sex, frowned upon by Christian missionaries who arrived in Hawaii from the early nineteenth century. This condemnation may be identified in Keauokalani Kepelino's description of surfing before Christianity:

All thought of work is at the end, only that of sport is left. The wife may go hungry, the children, the whole family, but the head of the house does not care. He is all for sport, that is his food. All day there is nothing but surfing. Many go out surfing as early as four in the morning -- men, women, children. There is fine sport; then from innocent pleasure they turn to evil pleasures; so it goes! (SurfArt.com, The History of Surfing: 5.07.03)

Kepelino, a Christian convert, was born approximately 1830 and it is possible to identify his Christian values in this condemnation of surfers' behaviour (Hawaii Books, Classic Authors: 5.07.03). Despite this, his description of a surfer is recognisable today. Much of this notion of the surfer as a layabout or an outsider evolves from its association with the myth of Hawaii and the hedonistic lifestyle as opposed to the grinding daily routine of the workplace. It informs later representations of the surfer who, "lives a life of escape for the individual trapped in his/her 48 hour week-a-year job" (Stratton, 1985).

Surfing was intrinsically bound up with consumerism and tourism in the minds of Americans from its earliest introduction in California. Surfing was introduced to California by George Freeth, an Irish/Hawaiian swimmer and surfer. Freeth was commissioned to give surfing demonstrations promoting the new railway on Redondo Beach in 1907. Surfing was further popularised when the World Olympic Swimming Champion, Duke Kahanamoku from Hawaii, visited and surfed in Atlantic City and Santa Monica in the early twentieth century. Mainstream culture further fed into the myth of Hawaii with romanticised depictions of the South Seas in films such as *Bird of Paradise* (1932), *The Hurricane* (1937) and a surf music craze which included Bing Crosby's performance of Academy Award winning *Sweet Leilani* in 1937. Media texts of this era stress Hawaii as paradise on earth, a place of romance and love. Media representations inspired a craze for Hawaiian culture which extended to middle-class youngsters attempting to imitate the bohemian Hawaiian lifestyle. By the mid 1930s a small enthusiastic surfing colony developed at San Onofre which attempted to emulate Hawaiian culture, playing Hawaiian guitars, Tahitian dancing and drinking (Kampion, 1998). To visit 'The Islands' became a sign of subcultural capital within surfing.

The fifties saw a rapid expansion of surf culture but it was a sport which was practised mainly by the white middle classes and was inextricably bound up with consumerism. The cost of the surfboard and the car necessary to transport the surfer to inaccessible beaches meant that only middle-class, affluent people could afford the surfing lifestyle. Stratton (1985) argues that surfing, so closely associated with the myth of Hawaii, represented a rebellious drop out lifestyle to middle-class mainstream America in the 1950s. However, the identification of the teenager by advertisers as a potential market and the threat of the Cold War led to a change in attitudes from the teenager as a threat to the teenager as 'clean teen', a phenomenon with which surfing was associated (Morris, 1993; Doherty, 1988).

In the early sixties, surfers were represented as typical American teenagers, clean cut and affluent. They also connoted the romance of the American frontier. The American male at the time was perceived as in crisis, a 'soft breadwinner'. Previously he pushed back the frontier, reclaiming the wilderness for civilization but in the fifties and sixties masculinity was perceived as weakened by a feminisation of America (Cohan, 1995; Kimmel, 1996; Slotkin, 1985). Surfers were represented as frontiersmen capable of pushing back the frontiers of America. An article in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1958, for instance, described surfers as conquering the, "last frontier. Civilization drops behind them when they leave the shore and the beauty and challenge of the great oceans is all around them" (Webster, 1958:38-39). Surfing in this era was particularly associated with California in the popular imagination.

California was the richest and most desirable state to settle down in America as it offered plentiful, well paid, employment in the aircraft industry and a comfortable lifestyle. The perceived 'good life' of California from the 1940s onwards attracted the biggest influx of people into a state that America had ever seen. In December 1945 *The Los Angeles Times* likened the influx of people to the Californian Gold Rush of the previous century, "luring hopeful men whose dreams are spun of golden opportunity" (Cited in May, 1999: 16). Indeed, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, California seemed to offer the concrete reality of the all-American Dream in which anything was possible so long as an individual worked hard (May, 1999; May, 2002). The ownership of pools in California accounted for 40% of all pools owned in America in 1959 (May, 1999: 27).

The influx of people in California from the '40s onwards tended to consist mainly of families with younger children. By the early sixties, the age demographic had fallen and California was perceived as a youthful state, indeed, a state that connoted 'youth'. As May (2002) asserts, children who became teenagers in the late '50s and early sixties benefited from this affluence and became a class which could enjoy leisure in, "a society so affluent that it [could] afford a large class of unemployed consumers" (*Newsweek* 58, Dec 11 th 1961:88). These benefits were extolled in the Beach Boys lyrics which described car culture (*Fun, Fun, Fun, Surfing Safari*), girls (*California Girls*) and surfing (*Surfin' USA*).

The Beach Boys songs exploited a surfing craze which emanated from California to the rest of the world. The surf craze was sold to teenagers across the mass media and was inspired by the release of Columbia's *Gidget* (1959), a film about a teenage girl (played by teen icon Sandra Dee) and a group of surfers in Malibu. *Gidget* was the first film to depict surfing culture to a mass audience and it was aimed at the lucrative teenage audience of the late fifties. *Gidget* depicted surfers as hedonistic layabouts. Most of the surfers represented are middle-class white teenagers lured by the thrill of the exotic 'Other' encapsulated in the mythical Islands (Rutsky, 1999). However, the leader of the surf community, Kahuna, gains his subcultural capital from his 'drop out' lifestyle and his name given to him, so he claims, by a Hawaiian chief. This representation of surfers became a paradigm for later depictions on film:

Surfers are almost universally depicted as embodying one or more of three basic myths. First, surfers are never participants in the economy, the 'system'. They stand literally, and figuratively, at the margins of society. They are dropouts, bums, criminals, pagans, deviants, or ascetics. Often they are sexy and virile. Most importantly, they are never normal and never employed. Surfers of all ages are shown to be 'goofing off', neglecting responsibility. (Reed, 1999)

The surf craze amongst teenagers which *Gidget* inspired was satisfied by the cheapness and availability of the foam board (Kampion, 1998: 69). New foam boards enabled surfboard manufacturers to produce up to 160 boards per week at a cost of \$70-\$80 (Young, 1994: 77). Joe Quigg developed the foam boards into the Malibu board, a surfboard which came to symbolise American surfing superiority on the waves at that time. Malibu boards were lighter and more manoeuvrable and this meant the beginner would learn how to surf much quicker. Hard core surfers, however, were dismayed at the growing commercialisation of surfing and the consequent overcrowding of the waves at Malibu:

For many surfers the real search for the perfect wave has been less to do with adventure, romance, and the pursuit of new experiences and more with just getting the hell away from what Mickey Dora called ‘all the surf dopes, ego heroes, rah-rah boys, concessionaires, lifeguards, fags, and finks.’ (Warshaw, 1997: 38)

‘The surfing safari’, as this quest became known, developed into a crucial myth in surf culture alongside the myths of the surfer as hedonistic layabouts or rebellious middle-class youth.

Despite their seeming subversiveness, surfers are products of middle-class culture and therefore the subculture interacts with mainstream culture in a different manner than working-class subcultures (Hall:1991). Unlike British subcultures such as Teds, Mods and Rockers, surfing does not use cultural objects in a subversive manner. It was necessary for surfers to possess cars, such as the woodie, with wooden sides which could be knocked out to accommodate surfboards. Cars were also necessary to transport surfers to inaccessible beaches to attract girls but were also an integral part of Californian culture in the fifties and sixties (May, 2002; May, 1999). The surfboard and surfer style, the bleached hair and the suntanned body also became signs of the subculture. Surfing therefore promised the middle class a myth of leisure intricately bound up with consumerism and based upon American values. Stratton compares biker and surf subcultures and concludes that they are predicated upon individuality, ownership and individuality, “in common with bikies, surfies emphasise a close link between the consumed object and individualism. In this way they assert two of the fundamentals of American capitalism; consumerism and individualism” (Stratton, 1985: 184).

In the early sixties Malibu and the Malibu wave was the standard for surf technique and at the cutting edge of surf technology. However, from the mid to late sixties, Australian surfers began to challenge American supremacy on the waves. Until the late fifties Australian surfing was institutionalised under the aegis of the Surf Lifesaving Association and surf subculture developed within the framework of a regulated beach (Pearson, 1978). Ironically, a visit and demonstration of Malibu boards by Californian lifeguards in 1956 inspired a change in Australian surfing values. Thousands of youngsters, attracted to the notion of the Californian lifestyle, clamoured for the new Malibu boards from local surfboard manufacturers. Within a short time, numbers of surfboard riders outstripped surf lifesaving club members, surf technique improved and by the mid sixties two Australians snatched the World Surfing Championships from America : Midget Farrelly in 1964 and Nat Young in 1966. In the late sixties to early seventies hot dogging was superseded by tube riding, made possible by the introduction of more manoeuvrable shortboards, in which the surfer interacted with the wave, riding through it. Shortboard riding was different from stylish hotdogging as it emphasised involvement with the wave and experimentation. Indeed, *The Surfer* magazine of 1968 notes,

“Stylistically because of a new shift in emphasis from nose riding to wave riding; hot dogging to involvement; restraint to experiment, it is a rare surfer who surfs in the same style that he did last year” (Kampion, 1968: 40). Surfers in the late sixties and early seventies adopted hippie values stressing experimentation, creativity and anti-competitive ideals. The middle-class demographic of the surfing community predisposed surf culture towards the hippie counterculture in the mid to late sixties into the early seventies. Hippie values such as movement, expressivity, dissociation, subjectivity, individualism and anti-competitiveness infiltrated surf subcultures and this led to the emergence of the ‘soul surfer’ (Brake, 1990). ‘Soul surfers’ dropped out, lived off the land, and were against competitions and these values were reflected in surf rhetoric in magazines and films of the late sixties and early seventies. The tube, a wave which curls back upon itself forming a barrel, became the perfect wave. Surfers associated the experience of riding the tube with drug trips, birth, reincarnation and orgasm. Ironically the late sixties and early seventies was a time of increasing commercialisation of surfing. The paradox of the soul surfer versus the commercialisation of surfing at this time may be encapsulated in the person of Gerry Lopez. Lopez was in the Hawaiian World Surfing Contest teams in 1970 and 1972, “where [maintains Kampion] he became the undisputed master of the barrel, establishing the tube as surfing’s ultimate maneuver and the Pipeline as surfing’s most perfect tube” (Kampion, 1998: 34). Lopez believed in a Zen approach to surfing but was also a shrewd entrepreneur and marketed his reputation under the Lightning Bolt logo. Such is Lopez’s subcultural capital that he starred in *Big Wednesday* as himself in the final sequence of the final apocalyptic ride on the Big Wednesday wave.

## **Surf Rhetoric and Authenticity in Big Wednesday**

Some of the attraction for surfing audiences in *Big Wednesday* may be attributable to Milius’s allusions to surf culture in the film’s title borrowed from John Severson’s 1961 ‘pure’ surf movie. Sepia titles and photographic images at the beginning of *Big Wednesday*, evoking nostalgia for a lost era of the early sixties, are by John Severson. Severson, a surf filmmaker and photographer of the early sixties, had a profound effect on surf culture. He promoted his films, one of them called *Surf Fever* (1960), through a self-published newsletter, which evolved into *The Surfer Magazine*, the surfers’ bible throughout the sixties. One of Severson’s images, used by Milius in the opening credits, particularly captures the power of a wave at Pipeline. Greg Noll, a Big Gun rider of the late fifties and early sixties, stands in front of a wave and the camera zooms out to reveal Noll’s, by no means slight, 6’ 4” frame dwarfed by the wave. The image demonstrates the formidable power of the sea against the frailty of the human body. Milius was so anxious to provide an authentic representation of the ocean, from the surfer’s point of view, that he used the best surf cinematographers and filmmakers, such as Greg MacGillivray who made reputedly the best surf film ever, *Five Summer Stories* (1972), George Greenough, whose lyrical and innovative camera work in *Crystal Voyager* (1973) celebrated the wave from inside the tube, and Dan Merkel whose water photography in *Free Ride* (1978) was deemed revolutionary. These surf film producers were highly esteemed in surfing culture and demonstrated Milius’ determination to represent the surfer’s perception of the ocean. Milius also used intertextual allusions to ‘pure’ surf films, such as Bruce Brown’s *The Endless Summer* (1966), in his representation of the Big Wednesday wave as a gladiatorial arena. This rhetorical strategy would be instantly recognizable to surfing audiences. These representations refer to the myth and rhetoric of surf

culture in notions of the ocean as eternal and all-powerful but the overarching theme of these images is the perfect wave that every surfer dreams of riding.

The Big Wednesday wave is the culmination of the quest for the perfect wave, a continuing trope in surf films and culture as discussed above. The waves are of crucial importance in *Big Wednesday* as they structure the narrative into five main sections, each named after a wave; the Eastern Swell, Summer '62; the Western Swell, Fall '65; the Northern Swell, Winter '68; the Great Swell Summer '74 and finally Big Wednesday. Each of the waves is linked with the mood of the time. Therefore, the Western Swell, Fall '65, described as "the swell of change", is surfed by Jack before he is sent to Vietnam. The rhythmic return of the seasons from year to year is reflected in a larger cycle of waves such as the Big Wednesday wave which returns every 10-12 years. Surfers return each year in order to discover that one elusive, perfect wave.

The waves and the ocean are aspects of an overall theme concerning time within the film. *Big Wednesday* consistently demonstrates unease with the concept of history and linear time. Linear time, time with a beginning, middle and end, signals the beginning and ending of life, the decay of the body and an end of surfing within the narrative. Milius also stresses mythic time in his depiction of the waves which recur in ten or twelve year cycles. The conflict between myth and history reflects surfers' ahistorical attitude to their past and their tendency to mythologize their culture. The most traumatic event in the film, the impact of Vietnam, a major historical event, is only alluded to through the attitudes of the surfers to the Draft and the death of their surfing comrade Waxer.

History represents linear time and human endeavour. An example of the progress of history and space can be identified in an examination of the commercialisation of surfing. Commercialisation, informed by discourses of modernity and consumerism and associated with the exploitation of surfing, is frowned upon within some parts of surf culture. The development of surfing from backyard culture to big business is shown in the progress of The Bear, the surfboard shaper and beach guru, from his one-man shaping industry to his shop manufacturing Bear surfboards. In the first scene when The Bear is introduced he is shown outside his shack at the end of the dilapidated pier at the Point creating the 'big gun' surfboard which will be ridden on Big Wednesday. When the pier is dismantled The Bear opens a shop in the Mall manufacturing surfboards. Such is his success that he employs surfers such as Waxer to clean his car and manufacture his surfboards. In *Big Wednesday*, the rise in commercialism and sponsorship is recorded in Matt's endorsement of Bear surfboards. However, Matt is not a competitive surfer, he surfs for social reasons to be with his friends. This conflict of interests and motivations between surfing for pleasure and surfing for competition, has been present almost since the beginning of surfing and may result from a combination of hedonism, surfing as a *helix* sport and surfers' refusal of 'buying into' the rat race (Jackson, 1997). Farmer (1996) observes that of all the motives given by surfers for surfing, competition is the least favoured. Competition, closely linked to commercialisation, is condemned in some quarters of surf culture. Evidently Milius disapproves of commercialisation, for in *Big Wednesday* the Bear's foray into commercial production is condemned; he becomes motivated by profit and denounces the laziness of his surfing workforce who prefer to surf than work. This is, in effect, a denouncement of surfing and its emphasis on friendship and the Bohemian lifestyle. It also runs contrary to the Bear's insistence on the importance of friendship to Matt.



The refusal to buy into the rat race is encapsulated by Matt who disavows his role as surf hero and rejects competition. Matt represents the surfer as rebellious, irresponsible and immature, an image, as discussed above, fostered by other films with a surfing background such as *Beach Party* (1963), *Point Break* (1991) and *Blue Juice* (1995). The refusal of the surfer to grow up and accept responsibility is a refusal to accept the mileposts of life such as marriage and death. As Eco (1981) notes in his essay about Superman, once a hero marries it is a sign of mortality, for the next great signpost in life is through death. It is significant that the surfer is seldom shown dying. Rather he disappears. This refusal to address death or mortality is symptomatic of the mythic hero whose dead body is either never recovered or, alternatively, he disappears (Lord Raglan, 1990). This may be seen in films such as *Point Break*, for instance, when Patrick Swayze's character, Bhol, walks into the water to surf the final ultimate wave he is shown taking a terrific wipeout but his body is never found. Similarly in *Big Wednesday* there is The Bear's story of the surfer whose body was never found after a terrific wipeout. This is more than merely a refusal to accept major signposts of life, it is a disavowal of linear time in favour of mythic time. Linear time, Milius suggests, leads to oblivion whereas mythic time results in immortality.

## **Vietnam , Linear Time and Oblivion**

Characters who enter historic time in *Big Wednesday* tend to either die or disappear. This is particularly evident in the plot elements surrounding Vietnam. Vietnam is represented only through the mediation of television on the night of Jack's departure, otherwise not represented at all. Most of the surfers, who are white and middle-class, attempt to evade the Draft. This accords with Brown's observation that most of the soldiers who were drafted tended to be those who were the least educated and the disadvantaged (T. Louise Brown, 1991). All the surfers, except Jack, are shown attempting to dodge the Vietnam draft. The process of registering for service is represented as dehumanising, involving men lining up, being examined and given a number. The surfers' various attempts to dodge the Draft are prefaced by a military-like preparation accompanied by a military soundtrack; Leroy acts like a mentally disturbed wino, Matt clips on a calliper and Waxer pretends to be gay. These strategies rely upon an element of truth; Leroy is an unstable character. Earlier in the film he is known as Leroy the Masochist and discovered attempting to barbeque himself at Jack's party. At the draft board, so convincing is his act, he is taken off to a mental institution. Matt's faked injury reflects his inner flawed persona but ironically becomes reality at the climax of the film when he injures his leg whilst surfing the Big Wednesday wave. Waxer switches from his surf Nazi persona and pretends to be gay. Originally the surf Nazi arose as a form of rebellion by a group of surfers including Greg Noll in the early sixties who wore Nazi regalia whilst surfing (Kampion, 1998:82). By 1978 the term 'surf Nazi' denoted a hardcore surfer who lives to surf, making The Bear's condemnation of Waxer's habit of dropping everything to surf more understandable. So when Waxer pretends to be gay he denies his 'real' persona and is drafted. Conversely, his friend who dons the Nazi gear is rejected by the Draft board. Waxer's last words to the recruiting officer are ironically prophetic, "If you send me to Vietnam I'll just die!" Jack, who accepts the Draft, metaphorically separated from his friends behind a glass partition, is not an active participant in this tableau. Recorded and written into history, his surfer persona disappears. Both Waxer and Jack are swallowed up, one to die in Vietnam , one to return. On Jack's return from Vietnam , he is first seen as a menacing shadow falling over Melanie, Matt's daughter, on the beach. He wears full combat gear on the beach, an ironic juxtaposition to the subversive

image of the surf Nazi of that era and to the absent Waxer. Jack's baptismal re-entry into the water washes away his Nazi persona and he is reunited with his friends.

It is possible to identify similarities between the interaction of American culture, surfing and Vietnam during the time period of *Big Wednesday*. At the beginning of the 1960s America regarded itself as invincible, however, forays into an alien environment resulted in American humiliation. Hellmann's notion that American expansion into Vietnam is an extension of the frontier myth may also be regarded as a further parallel (Hellmann, 1986). This is what makes the recollection of the myth of Malibu in its finest hour so powerful. Surfing the perfect wave at the climax of the film enables an evocation of this idyllic, mythic time. The myth of the perfect wave, it might be argued, articulates an eternal truth. In his representation of waves, Milius proposes that the ocean is immortal and the waves are used as a sign of recurring mythic time.

In *Big Wednesday* two voices articulate the myth of the perfect wave, the unknown voice-over at the beginning of the film and the rhetoric of The Bear. The voice-over is a young surfer from the next generation reflecting upon the three friends. He positions the Big Wednesday wave in the endless cycle of waves. *Big Wednesday* begins with the voice-over of the unknown surfer introducing the main characters, as one would present the protagonists in a story told around a campfire on the beach, "I remember the three friends best, Matt, Jack, Leroy. They were the big names then; our own royalty. This was their place and their story."

The voice-over opening of the film positions the three main characters, Matt Johnson, Jack Barlow and Leroy Smith as kings of The Point, "our own royalty". The first image of the three friends is when they are framed in the broken archway, like a ruined Roman Coliseum, at the top of the steps leading onto the beach. Matt Johnson, suffering a hangover, is dragged into the beach arena by his two friends, Jack Barlow and Leroy Smith. Leroy pleads with a surfer on the beach to lend Matt his 'stick', 'He needs to get into the sea. He's dying.' The sea acts as an agent of regeneration, once Matt is on the board he is transformed into the legendary hot dogging champion of The Point.

However, Matt has no self-discipline and his drunkenness tends to cause trouble; first at a party in Jack's house, later at a bar in Tijuana and finally he causes an accident on the highway. He admits to The Bear that as a drunk he is an unsuitable role model for young surfers. He is a flawed hero, similar to Achilles, who retires from the battlefield only to return to glory at the end of the film. The similarity to Achilles, who hides in the women's quarters rather than fight in the Trojan War, is marked when Matt disowns his responsibility when drafted to Vietnam, faking a leg injury, a veritable Achilles heel.

As implied in the opening voice-over, surf culture is hierarchical and feudal in *Big Wednesday*: Matt, Jack and Leroy are dubbed 'The Kings' by the voice-over and in their court The Bear, a surfboard shaper, is the High Priest/ Merlin figure. In surfing, a shaper tends to be regarded in a special way as someone who can magically shape a crude lump of foam into a surfboard. The notion of 'special' and 'magic' surfboards is prevalent in surfing. In his autobiography, for instance, Nat Young recounts how he 'created' his special board, 'Sam', in 1966 using the advice of surfing guru and shaper George Greenough. Young records the mystic credentials of 'Sam' when he takes a wipeout in the Australian Championship:

When I fell off in the final, letting Sam wash in towards the rocks on shore, thousands of eyes were watching the board's progress. As if responding to my call, he floated out in the rip, with us both reaching the same spot in the shortest possible time. The word was out all over Newcastle [ Australia ], even the guy at the service station where we stopped for fuel before heading back to Sydney, was talking about Sam, Nat's magic board. (Young, 1998: 131)

Milius bases The Bear upon a number of Malibu shapers in the early sixties such as Joe Quigg and Dale Velzny. The Bear is described by Milius as:

The old man of the sea, the one who knew where the great swells came from and why. He was the one we looked up to. He made our boards. He taught us how to ride. He taught us how to live. He taught us about courage and the meaning of friendship. Before The Bear there were other legends. After he's gone others will carry the torch. That's why The Bear will live forever. (Big Wednesday, 20 th Anniversary: 14.01.01)

The Bear's rhetoric is hyperbolic, in reminiscing about the past, for instance, he tells young surfers of a big ride in which the, "water was hitting the cliffs and splashing 100ft high -- it was like the end of the world -- a surfer disappeared, they never found his body -- just little pieces of his board." The myth exaggerates the wipeout into the biggest wipeout in history. So when the Bear prophesies, John the Baptist-like, that there will come, "a swell so big and so strong it'll wipe out everything before it", his position within the surf culture of the film places his articulation as prophecy rather than ranting or hyperbole. Similarly, when the Big Wednesday wave arrives, a surfer comments upon the height of the wave and is assured by the Bear that it is nothing, "just the lemon next to the pie". The Big Wednesday wave is going to be apocalyptic.

The narrative positions both Matt and the Bear as legendary heroes. As the story purports to be myth, the product of oral culture, it is implied that the stature of The Bear and Matt Johnson will grow in time, as Carlyle argues, "Why, in thirty or forty years, were there no books, any great man would grow *mythic*, the contemporary who had once all seen him, being once all dead" (Segal, 2000: 25-26). Carlyle implies that man's mortality may be conquered with the passage of time and the power of myth and it is this notion which is fostered in *Big Wednesday*. The mythic versus the historic tends to find expression in Milius' use of setting. According to Oswald (1995), the stress on setting in an apocalyptic narrative, "occurs in a familiar or an immediate setting that has been transformed into a terrifying Armageddon" (Oswald, 1995: 60). Accordingly, Fiske's diagram may be amended to add a further layer of meaning to the film:

A	Anomalous category	B
SEA	Beach	HIGHWAY
APOCALYPSE	Decay	HISTORY
NATURE/OPEN AIR	Condemned pier/Decay	CULTURE/MALL

SWIMMING/BODY

Surfboard

CAR/CAMPER VAN

IMMATURITY

Beachhouse

DOMESTICITY

FRONTIERSMAN/DOING The Point/Big Wednesday Wave TOURISM/LOOKING

The amended diagram, like Fiske's original idea, bases *Big Wednesday's* values upon a culture/nature binary. This binary may be further developed by adding the notion of myth/history. The ocean and the surfer are aligned with myth, whereas cultural phenomena such as the highway, the car and the shopping mall are aligned with history.

The ocean is an archetype associated with purification, renewal, eternity, rebirth and the apocalypse in *Big Wednesday*. The ocean changes from season to season but always with the promise of the one big swell that will wipe out all before it. The scenes of terrifying carnage and wipeout in the final sequences are played out against a beach which is condemned. This emphasis on the wipeout sequence is suggested by Milius in his assertion that, "It's going to be like a battle out in the water and we want to use techniques that will emphasise things like wipeouts" (Jarrett, 1976: 14). The notion of the sea as dangerous and untamed is a metaphor for the wilderness and reflects American culture's engagement with the frontier myth in which the white American male travels from the Metropolis to the wilderness. There he carves out civilization from the wilderness, forming order from chaos (Slotkin, 1985). The surfer, with his nomadic lifestyle, forever exploring unknown waters and other cultures is an imperial coloniser of the imagined American frontier. According to Wilson (1992), the notion of the wilderness is attractive to an America which has conquered and distanced itself from nature:

The idea of nature as an untrammelled refuge is most attractive to cultures situated at some distance from the actual world, and whose values tend to rest on a rigid distinction between the human and the non-human. (Wilson, 1992:27)

The frontier, however, is an imagined territory, just as the perfect wave can never be reality. In his analysis of pure surf films such as *The Endless Summer* and *The Morning of the Earth*, Lewis notes:

The surf, that is, is imagined as a particular kind of territory -- a space which is both evanescent and miraculous in its formations but eternal in its rhythmic re-appearance and connections to all other waves and all other water on the planet. These Romantic imaginings of air and water defy the logics and territorial imperatives of land-based cartographies and international political and military determinations. Surfing could free the individual from the suffocating orderliness of the land; the surfer is uniquely placed to access the mystery and primitive pleasures of this essentialized, 'other' geography. (Lewis, 2001)

It seems inevitable that surfing and the body of the surfer, then, should reflect this sense of freedom in its oral history and myths. The ocean as an untameable monster is foregrounded at the end of *Big Wednesday* when it becomes an Apocalyptic arena in which surfers battle to control the waves. The scene begins with the sea in turmoil, the beach a scene of panic in which lifeguards, attempting to restore order, frantically phone each other, helicopters winch

surfers to safety and lifeboats pull surfers out of the water. The cliffs at the edge of the highway are crowded with sightseers present to watch surfers, injured and bleeding, pulled out of the sea. The crowds on the cliff top, watching from a safe distance are mere tourists, metaphors for contemporary America, content to look rather than 'do' (Urry, 2002). The cliff top adjoins the highway and like many of the spaces in *Big Wednesday* is linked with a nature/culture binary. The highway is especially significant in an examination of the nature/culture binary as it forms a space in which the American frontier may be accessed. Further, the beach is the liminal space in which historic and mythic time come together; the decay of the man-made versus the eternal ocean. The theme of man-made/decay versus nature/eternity recurs in other settings in *Big Wednesday*, specifically in the settings and objects associated with the highway and the home.

The highway represents linear, historic time. During the fifties and sixties tourism in America grew by 10% and it was founded upon the highway and the car. The car and the transport infrastructure of California were an integral part of the state's image. In the late 1960s approximately 66% of the land in South California's urban landscape was implicated in car ownership either as roads, parking lots or service stations (May, 1999: 19). The car may therefore be regarded as a metaphor for progress:

It [the car] is always moving ahead -- although the effect is the opposite, as if the landscape were moving past us, into the inconsequential shadows of history. In this very limited respect, time has replaced space as the predominant way our experience of the world is organised. (Wilson, 1992: 34)

The car is a sign of the present, the beginning of the journey is behind the tourist/traveller, the journey's end is in the future. In the *Big Wednesday*, journeys in a car tend to end in either life or death. The trip to Tijuana ends with an announcement by Peggy that she is expecting Matt's child. There is a brawl in a bar which ends with a death. Waxer's last journey is in a hearse along the highway to the cemetery.

The highway and culture are signs of history, representing the inception of time and linearity -- the beginning, middle and end of life. Spaces like the mall and the roadside café are constructed to appeal to or service the tourist. They occupy a point on a journey between the past and the future -- symbolising the present. As such, the highway is a site of constant flux. For instance, a burger joint in the early sixties is transformed into The Cosmic Café run by hippies by the late sixties.

The camper which Matt causes to crash is a type of 'house on wheels' and as such implies a type of freedom, but campers are:

Temporary dwellings. [They] imply a kind of freedom and have thus found a special place in the North American ideological landscape. This phenomenon is usually expressed as freedom from ties to place, to family, and to a job; freedom to move across the land as we want and to make new connections with it. (Wilson, 1992: 31)

The camper may infer freedom, however, it is a freedom tied to a house -- the house on wheels -- a tame kind of freedom, the freedom to gaze as tourists but not to touch. The connections made by tourists are not true connections in which there is a physical

engagement with the land, rather the tourist visits and looks at sites constructed especially for him/her. Culture and its trappings are represented as alien to surfers.

In *Big Wednesday* the highway and the mall are depicted as spaces in which surfers are isolated or estranged. Matt is estranged from Jack through his drunken bullfight with the cars, causing a crash. On the road to the cemetery at Waxer's funeral Matt is isolated from both the mourners, who regard him with suspicion, and the surfers who do not show up.

The surfer is not at home in culture. He is linked with nature. When surfers 'buy' into American land-based culture they alienate themselves from their friends. The Bear moves to the Mall from the dilapidated pier and in doing so forgets his roots, turning a skateboarder (a land surfer) out of his shop. His attitude to his fellow surfers also changes. When Waxer asks him for a holiday he replies that he should not have employed surfers as they always want to go surfing when there is a good swell.

Domesticity, as part of culture, is regarded in a negative light, almost akin to death or oblivion for the (male) surfer. Borrowing motifs from the Western in surf films such as *Point Break* (1991), *Blue Juice* (1995) and *Puberty Blues* (1981), the female represents culture, domesticity and is marginalized on the borders of surf culture and space. On the beach, the girlfriend is regarded as a surfer's accessory (Fiske, 1983). Girls are not independent and their prime goal appears to be marriage and domesticity. Surfer girls such as Peggy are seen as figures of fun or scorn by male surfers, called names (Peggy the Grinder) and heckled off the waves. *Gidget* (1959), the first popular surfing film, is about surfer girl Gidget's ultimate aim to get Moondoggie to commit and settle down. Surfing for her is unimportant when compared with marriage. Even in *Blue Crush* (2003), the dedicated surfer girl Anna Marie's dreams of winning a surfing contest falter when she falls for Matt Tollman, a football player. Compare this with Bhodi in *Point Break*, Leroy in *Big Wednesday* and Frankie in the *Beach Party* films who refuse to accept responsibility and settle down.

Here an analogy may be drawn linking this notion of woman/culture, surfer/nature with the spaces and how they are used in *Big Wednesday*. The surfer is located in a position similar to that of the hero in the classical western. The binaries in classical narrative westerns as inside/outside and wilderness/civilization are replicated in *Big Wednesday* (Wright, 1977). In the western the wilderness becomes the hero's source of power:

He [the hero] is an independent and autonomous individual *because* he is part of the land. The strength that makes him unique and necessary to society and the beauty that makes him desirable to the girl are human counterparts to the strength and beauty of the wilderness. (Wright, 1977: 189)

Like the classic cowboy/frontiersman, Matt's fame and power as a hero is in his connection with the ocean. When he settles down to responsibility and opens his own business it is as a swimming pool cleaner. The swimming pool is a symbol of suburban 'tamed' water, contained within the backyard and situated next to a house. It is the closest Matt comes to water within suburbia.

If the suburban pool is linked with domesticity and history, the ocean is a sign of the apocalypse and the end of history. Oswalt (1995) argues that apocalyptic narrative in contemporary Hollywood films is predicated upon the control of time:

The apocalyptic model allows us to make sense of our lives by providing a means by which to order time. By placing the life drama in relation to a beginning, a middle, and an end, the apocalypse provides coherence and consonance -- it makes time trustworthy, especially when plot points towards the future, as it does in the apocalypse. (Oswalt, 1995:61)

Oswalt notes that the apocalypse in traditional Judeo-Christian narratives is signalled by the arrival of a messianic figure who ushers in the Kingdom of God when all evil-doing is destroyed. In the contemporary Hollywood apocalyptic narrative, however, the messianic figure signals a second chance on earth. In *Big Wednesday*, it would be more logical for Leroy, as a big wave surfer, rather than Matt to surf the apocalyptic wave. Matt, however, is set apart from the other surfers of The Point as special. The Bear, a contemporary equivalent of John the Baptist, creates the special surfboard specifically for Matt, giving it to him on the eve of Big Wednesday. The audience is lead to assume Matt's ride of the apocalyptic wave may act as a type of deliverance, healing the rupture between the friends, old style hot-dogging, the new short board surfers and redeeming Matt. Matt, a remnant of the past, surfs it with Gerry Lopez, who represents the contemporary, the tube and the Pipeline. History becomes myth in a struggle between man and the ocean.

### **Surfing the Apocalypse -- Recurring Themes**

*Big Wednesday* is a secular rather than religious myth. Like all mediated texts it reflects the values of the culture that produces it. As Fiske argues, media representation has the power to, "defuse its [the beach's] potential radicalism" (Fiske, 1983: 145). Milius's representation of the ocean, the land and the surfers but mainly the beach, organizes the myth of the beach, "so that [its] overflowing meanings are controlled and legitimised" (Fiske, 1983: 145). In the context of *Big Wednesday*, the second chance is for Matt to become a part of American culture. The Bear asserts, "Nobody surfs forever", however, he cannot come to terms with culture and reinvents himself as 'the garbage man', before disappearing into history. Matt must also come to terms with his own mortality and the decay of his body. Just as the marks of man on the beach, the arch and the pier, must acquiesce to the dictates of time so Matt must come to terms with his future through the past.

The final scene of *Big Wednesday* is a mirror reflection of the final sequence in *The Searchers*. Once John Wayne has completed his role as saviour to the burgeoning American civilization, there is no place for him. The hero cannot be domesticated and tamed; he has no choice but to exit through the door into the wilderness and pass into legend. In *Big Wednesday*, Matt Johnson exits the beach climbing over the boarded up entrance into 'the suffocating orderliness of the land'. Unlike the cowboy who has no home, Matt has nowhere to go *except* home, unless he too becomes a bum like The Bear. As Matt limps along the beach, a young surfer approaches him and tells him, "That was the hottest ride I've ever seen. I just wanted to tell you." In response Matt gives his surfboard to the unknown surfer telling him to save it for a day such as this, when another big wave will appear. In doing so Matt passes on his legend to the next generation. The surfboard he hands to the young surfer is a metaphor for Carlyle's notion of the myth as constructed through passing from one generation to the next. The young surfer, possibly the voice-over at *Big Wednesday*'s opening, who may even represent Milius himself, recounts Matt's story in the film narrative

and in doing so passes down the legend of the Big Wednesday wave to not only the surfing audience but to audiences of the film.

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