Endless Winter:

An Analysis of The Political Economy of

Irish Surf Films

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I confirm that the work has been completed in full compliance with relevant university policies, including the Academic Integrity policy, the Trinity Policy on Good Research Practice, and the guidance on AI and GenAI in Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Research.

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Summary

This thesis is a study of surf filmmaking in Ireland. It is a contribution to studies of filmmaking in Irish cinema, and internationally. It is also a study in the political economy of media production. Surf films are an area that remains critically undeveloped within film studies. Scholarly references to 'surf movies' in film studies texts and histories of cinema are rare, even though subcultural surf films have existed in independent and vertically integrated economies since the 1950s. Surf films emerged from early amateur forms of filmmaking during the 1950s, existing for the most part outside traditional frameworks of film distribution and exhibition (with some notable exceptions). Subcultural films about surfing in Ireland began to emerge during the mid-1990s and the first indigenous Irish surf film was produced in 2002, reflecting the boom in surfing during the Celtic tiger years. By the early 2010s, Irish surf films had coalesced into a recognisable genre, utilising video platforms and film festivals as a means of distribution and exhibition. This thesis bridges the research gap between the study of Irish film and media, and the emergence of Irish surf films. The work is structured in the methodological frameworks of the political economy of media. I draw on the work of political economists such as Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, Vincent Mosco, and Janet Wasko, and sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Thorstein Veblen. This is grounded in a diachronic study of the production, distribution and exhibition which examines the interlinked ideological and aesthetic tendencies of Irish surf films. Although it is not chronological, the work also serves as a history of this topic.

The thesis shows how subcultural Irish surf films are problematic for dominant interpretations of the political economy. This is because they are mostly unreflective of mainstream forms of finance and production in private or publicly funded media. I argue that subcultural Irish surf films are instead based in a community ethos, in which social and cultural capital play a greater role than economic capital in the circulation of the films.

In the case of short Irish surf films (the most common type of production) this grassroots form of cultural production can be regarded as an autonomous form of political economy, wherein filmmakers and creators maintain agency over their creations.

I have organised this work to balance the potential breadth and depth of the study. Chapter one introduces the subject. Chapter two provides an overview of theories of political economy in economics and its application in studies of film and media studies. Chapter three analyses the unique subcultural politics at play in Irish surf films which are essential to understanding the form. Chapter four provides a socio-historical context to the emergence of Irish surf films, showing how an autonomous market of subcultural surf films on VHS and DVD existed prior to their mass distribution on video hosting platforms. Chapter five examines two examples of feature length Irish surf films – *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea* – to show how their public sources of funding were predicated on a perceived relationship between surfing and Irish culture and heritage. Chapter six shows how crowdfunded Irish surf films are representative of autonomous forms of political economy, and how stardom and diaspora drove the production of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest*. Chapter seven examines four examples of the most common form of Irish surf film; the short films also known as edits. This chapter emphasises their independent, community-based values, in which social, cultural, and economic capital intersect. Chapter eight follows this by analysing the role of surf film festivals in Ireland, and the role they play in this shadow economy of Irish filmmaking. Chapter nine discusses key findings. The thesis concludes by arguing that surf films represent an important historical trend in Irish filmmaking and one of the most sustained examples of participatory, collaborative community-based filmmaking in Ireland. This should be incorporated into the story of Irish film and be reflected in future scholarship and the archive.

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Short List of Vernacular Terms

Barrel – The hollow part of the wave that surfers aim to surf within, also known as a tube.

Beach break – A wave that breaks predominantly along a sandy beach or coastline.

Big wave surfing – A form of surfing which may often involve a jet ski pulling a surfer onto a giant wave.

Drop-in – To take off on wave that someone else is already riding on. Not good etiquette.

Duck dive – To paddle and push forward and down underneath an oncoming wave.

Edit – A common name used to describe short surf films.

Freesurfing – to surf purely for personal pleasure, rather than engaging in the activity as a competitive sport.

He'nalu – The Hawaiian name for surfing which translates roughly as 'wave sliding'.

Heavy – A term to describe a particularly difficult, hairy, or nerve-wracking situation.

Kook – a new or inexperienced surfer, often ridiculed.

Locals only – a phrase which encapsulates the territoriality of surfing communities. This perspective is often embraced in crowded surfing locations, but also often rejected by welcoming surf communities.

Point break – a type of wave that breaks at a specific point in the ocean, such as over a reef or sea mount.

Set – a term that describes how group of waves arrives in sets

Soul surfer - A surfer who rides for personal joy and spiritual connection, not competition. These figures are often idealised in surf films.

Stoke – a term that describes the euphoric emotions at the centre of the surfing experience.

Surf movie – films which feature that act of surfing at the centre of their production. Often regarded as documentaries, they are more accurately described as works of creative nonfiction.

Tube – See Barrel.

Wahine – A Māori word for woman, often applied in surf slang to female surfers.

Waterman – a term to describe an individual who is regarded within the surfing subculture as a highly proficient figure in water-based pursuits beyond surfing, such as lifesaving, swimming, sailing, windsurfing, kayaking, etc.

Wipeout – falling off the board whilst attempting to ride on a wave.

Chapter 1 – Introducing Surf Movies and Irish Cinema

This chapter outlines the research and its origins. It introduces the central research questions about the production, distribution and exhibition of Irish surf films, arguing that that surf films deserve recognition as legitimate objects of study in the fields of critical political economy and film studies. The chapter also defines the form, details the methods of data collection, and offers a brief history of surfing as a cultural activity.

1.1 - Introduction

After work on a bitterly cold dark night in late January of 2014, I drove to the Bundoran cineplex in County Donegal from Dublin to see the premiere of a locally produced surf film titled *Wet Dreams*. I had been researching Irish surf films for a few years and noticed the film advertised on social media, so I decided to make the trip without knowing exactly what to expect at this kind of premiere. Perhaps there would be no one else there? Arriving at the cinema I knew something interesting was afoot. I was unable to find a space in the cinema car park, or the nearby shopping centre, so I parked on the seafront overlooking Bundoran's famous centrally located surf break, The Peak. Walking into the foyer, the usually quiet movie theatre now thronged with activity. Surfers, families, local people, and curious onlookers all intermingled whilst enjoying refreshments, in the manner of an event held at the Irish Film Institute. As the film was about to start the crowd headed for the screen, but it was soon clear that the audience was too big for the room. People packed themselves onto the stairs which were used as makeshift seats, and the non-seated area at front of the cinema was populated by people who lay down or sat cross legged on the floor. Others stood in the aisle, or the entrance tunnel. Members of the Pockets Full of Water collaborative group (the film's producers), led by Giles Carey, sat on an old sofa at the front of the cinema facing the audience, surrounded by their public. Luckily there were no emergencies in the cinema that night. Like the factory workers filmed in early Lumière actualities, many had come to see themselves, or people they knew, on film. I have never

had a similarly raucous experience in an Irish cinema. The film had free entry and lasted only 30 mins. It showcased an amateur aesthetic which featured many local surfers, people, and places in and around Bundoran. Bundoran Cineplex provided the screen free of charge, and the film was later released on YouTube where its trailer alone has been viewed over 26,000 times (Pockets Full of Water 2012). I met people in the audience who had travelled from Rossbeg (over an hour's drive north of Bundoran), Tramore (over 2 hours away, in north county Donegal), Strandhill (County Sligo) and other locales in the region, just to see the film. The vibrancy and zest with which this community participated in the screening and event was remarkable. How had a small, zero budget, and highly localised film stirred up so much interest?

Figure 1: A photo of the filmmakers and audience at the Wet Dreams Premiere, Bundoran Cineplex, 2014

One year earlier, in 2013, I had presented a paper on Irish surf films in the very same Bundoran cinema screen on the first ever dedicated Irish academic panel for surf culture alongside Dr. Easkey Britton, Professor Scott Laderman (University of Minnesota,

Duluth), and Professor Tim Cooley (University of California, Santa Barbara).[1] As an surfer and educator with a particular interest in Irish filmmaking, I had been drawn to the emergent form of Irish surf films since the early 2000s. Now it seemed as if the form was reaching a critical mass; the first Shore Shots Irish Surf Film Festival was also staged for the first time in 2013, featuring many new short Irish surf films, and continued in 2014. A few years earlier, another striking moment had led me to think critically about the potentially negative consequences of this form of filmmaking, particularly in terms of the relationship between surf films and mass tourism, which is epitomized by Urry's notion of the tourist gaze (2011). I have personally experienced the commodification of place which Urry describes and which is referred to in the chapter on the subcultural politics of Irish surf films. For years I had surfed at a very rural local break with a unique coastal ecosystem in county Donegal. Surfers were mostly unheard of because of the challenges in accessing and gaining knowledge of the location. Then, whilst watching *Waveriders* in the cinema 2008, I saw my secret location depicted on the big screen for the world to see. By 2014 this location was signposted as part of the Wild Atlantic Way, a tourism trail which aimed to rival California's Pacific Coast Highway (Sheehan 2014). By 2024, surfers are found at this location every time a swell appears, as is their associated ecological footprint. What was once a townland dedicated to small agrarian farms has become a centre for tourism and lifestyle activities. For good or ill, surfing has become part of the contemporary heritage of this space.

[1] This was the Transatlantic Connections conference, organised by Dr. Niamh Hamill and Drew University and staged in a variety of locations across Bundoran.

Figure 2: The Commodification of place: my secret surf spot pictured in Joel Conroy's Waveriders

These events shaped my research questions. It seemed appropriate to start from the very beginning. What are Irish surf films? Why were so many films emerging from the subcultural community? Who was making them? What was their history? How were they produced, and how were they being exhibited and distributed? Who consumed them? Where did their aesthetics come from? Could they be considered as part of a national, or even transnational Irish cinema? Was anybody making any money from them? Or, were they based in a subcultural community in which social and cultural capital held greater value than economic gain?

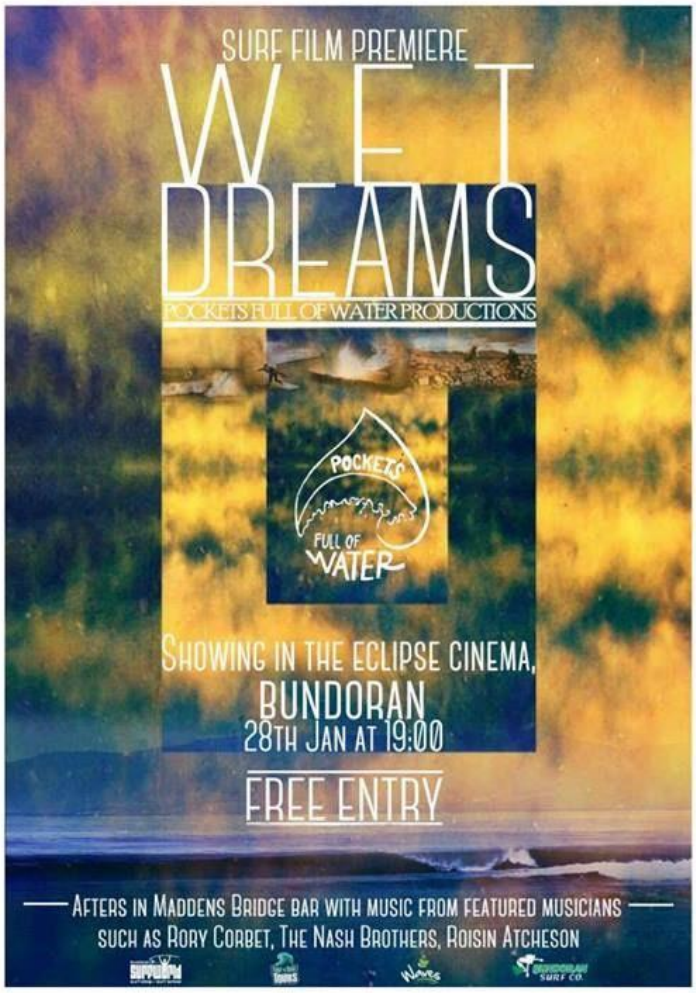

Figure 3:A Wet Dreams poster which was circulated on social media before the premiere

1.2 - Thinking Critically about Irish Surf Films.

This thesis is not about surfing. It is a study about films and filmmaking. Surf films, or films about surfing, have existed since at least 1906. A subcultural economy for this form of cultural production became established in the United States during the 1950s, developing into a popular genre by the 1960s and 1970s. Surf films continue to thrive in the 21st century, not just in the United States or Australia, but internationally, and in Ireland. Most surf films are now released online on a wide variety of online platforms, from video hosting sites such as YouTube and Vimeo to streaming networks such as the

Surf Network, Garage Entertainment, and Nalu TV. Some academics such as John Engle (2015), Joan Ormrod (2005), Keith Beattie (2001, 2005), and Douglas Booth (1996) have disparately attempted to analyse and define the form, but surf films have been mostly overlooked by scholarship within the field of film studies, and in popular histories of cinema (such as Marc Cousins *The Story of Film*, for example). Over 20 years ago Keith Beattie noted that "surf film and surf video have been excluded from the documentary canon and receive scant, if any, attention within film theory" (2001, 334). Beattie argued that for documentary to recognise a greater range of creative practices, it must move "beyond discourses of sobriety", and this should include the "previously marginalized and hence untheorized forms of surf film and video" (ibid).

That surf films are overlooked by the disciplines which should offer their examination is problematic. The reasons for this neglect are unclear. Perhaps because surf films predominantly emanate from subculture and 'speak' with a subcultural vernacular, they are difficult for 'outsiders' to engage with. Perhaps it is because surf films are incorrectly considered to be 'sports' films. I would argue that a key reason for their neglect lies in their contemporary status as online videos. In an introduction to *Film Criticism* in 2016, Stephen Groening argued that there is a tendency in film studies to focus critical forms of analysis on films generally regarded as falling under the categories of "serious", "influential", "artistic", or "exceptional", (2016, 6), noting that…

> residues of high/low cultural hierarchies coat academic film and media criticism. That (theatrically released) films are granted in depth attention to detail, skill, and artistry, while videos which populate the digital displays in our homes, offices, are treated as illustrations of larger socioeconomic trends is, in no small part, due to judgments of taste and the accrual of cultural capital.

Groening's position is that to view online videos simply as the products of technological, social, or cultural upheavals constitutes a form of analysis which rejects regarding online

videos as “autonomous art objects”, which “is the clear opposite of how novels, poems, and films are treated in the academy” (1). In this sense, this analysis argues that Irish surf films which are released on platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube should be regarded with the same intellectual rigour as mainstream forms of Irish screen media. This aligns with Groening’s assertion that there should be…

> a new point of emphasis in film studies scholarship on online culture, not necessarily to reduce online videos to meanings and messages nor to dismiss them as merely iterative examples of ‘sharing culture’, ‘the loss of privacy’, the ‘tyranny of intimacy’, or the new age of the image. Rather we can think about online video aesthetics in terms of community, taste, conventions, sensation, feeling, affect, politics, representation, and knowledge (6).

The thesis therefore bridges a chasm between this form of creative media production and academic studies of Irish films and film cultures, such as those of Rockett, Barton, Flynn, Tracy et al. Surfing has inspired amateur film production in Ireland since the 1970s, yet no history of any kind exists for the topic and no studies exist of subcultural surf filmmaking outside the USA and Australia. In the absence of pre-existing analyses, it is pertinent to ask what surf filmmaking has to do with what we think of as Irish cinema? Surf films are clearly a *form* of Irish cinema, but they do not fit the paradigms that dominate interpretations of screen industries in Ireland, nor do they easily fall under labels such as ‘national’ or ‘transnational’ cinemas. Irish surf films differ almost entirely in their modes of production, labour, exhibition, and distribution from mainstream Irish filmmaking practices. But they nevertheless represent a distinct film culture which should be incorporated into the study of filmmaking in Ireland.

The objective of this thesis is to fundamentally explore the political economy of Irish surf films in terms of their production, exhibition, and distribution. This entails a wideranging diachronic analysis of their history, their modes of cultural production, their

use of labour and resources, their markets, their forms of distribution, their funding, and their community networks. This framework explores the dual role of surf films as artistic products and economic commodities within a subcultural market. The theoretical application of political economy in both economics and film, media, and communications studies "provides an accessible approach to the study of economic issues" (Stilwell 2014, 1). But in attempting to answer the question 'what are Irish surf films' utilising this theoretical approach, it also became clear that many Irish surf films offer a challenge to dominant strands of theoretical political economy of media. As a result, this thesis ultimately concerns the theory of political economy to the same extent as it does Irish surf films. In this sense, as aspiration of this thesis is to add to existing critical approaches in the theoretical political economy of media, rather than to dismiss them.

1.3 - A Short Note on the Historical Origins of Surfing

It is not the intention of this work to provide a history of surfing. However, some aspects of the history of the activity are crucial to understanding modern surf culture. Although some researchers have suggested that surfing's early roots may have been in places like ancient Peru and Senegal, the history of the practice is most clearly and deeply established in Hawaii. Surfing was first documented by Europeans when Captain James Cook's crew encountered it upon their arrival in Hawaii in 1779. Surfing originated as a deeply rooted cultural and spiritual practice in ancient Hawaii, where it was known as *he'e nalu*, which translates roughly as 'wave sliding'. The earliest record of surfing in Hawaii dates to the 15th century, but it is believed the practice may have been part of an earlier Polynesian voyaging culture, perhaps dating as far back as 3000 years. Prior to European discovery, surfing was far more than a recreational activity. It was embedded in religious rituals, social hierarchy, and

cultural identity. Both chiefs and everyday people surfed, but access to certain boards and breaks was often governed by social class and local custom. Surfing was understood as an activity tied to the rhythms of nature and to native Hawaiian cosmology. This reflected a spiritual ideology in which the ocean was regarded as a sacred space. Early European contact and the influence of missionaries in the 19th century led to the suppression of many Hawaiian cultural practices, including surfing, which declined sharply during this period.

After the U.S. annexation of Hawaii in 1898, surfing was revived and popularised by both Native Hawaiians and white Americans. However, it was increasingly reframed through a Western lens, leading to its commodification as a lifestyle activity. In the early 20th century, figures like Duke Kahanamoku popularised the sport internationally, but often in contexts detached from its origins. By the mid-20th century, especially after World War II, surfing was a part of a fully commodified consumer popular culture in locations such as California, and marketed as a leisure activity and lifestyle through films, magazines, and consumer products. This transformation erased much of surfing's indigenous Hawaiian significance, repackaging it as a commercial and largely white, middle-class subculture.

The earliest extant examples of surfing in the moving image can be traced to a scenic actuality produced by Robert Bonine for the Thomas Edison Company in 1906 titled *Surf Board Riders, Waikiki, Honolulu, Hawaiian Islands*. This film features indigenous Hawaiian boardriders paddling out and surfing two-foot waves, and is widely regarded as the first surf film. The film was shot from the shore and films 1 surfer riding a wave toward shore and then paddling back out, whilst others paddle around him. The basic dramatic narrative at the heart of all surf films - both documentary and fiction - is already present in the Bonine film, in that "pitting people against wave motion causes natural

drama" (Thoms, 2000, p. 10). For in depth histories of surfing and its association with western colonialism, see work by Ben R. Finney & James D. Houston (1996), Scott Laderman (2014), Matt Warshaw, Isaiah Helekunihi Walker (2011), and John R. K. Clark (2011).

1.4 – Defining Irish Surf Films

In this thesis, what I refer to as 'Irish surf films' covers a wide variety of film forms. But put simply, Irish surf films are films about surfing in Ireland. Many of these films differ widely in form, aesthetics, and financing, and providing a clear definition of their character is challenging. However, it can be stated that the majority of Irish surf films are indigenously produced short films which emerge from the subcultural surfing community in Ireland. These short films coalesced into a genre around 2010 from an emergent and pre-existing form of production (which utilised DVDs, sold online and in surf shops, as a means of distribution). These short films are based in a community form of media production which utilises video hosting platforms, localised screenings, and surf film festivals as a means of exhibition and distribution. For the most part, these films operate outside mainstream forms of film production and finance in Ireland. A simplistic definition could simply describe them as documentaries about surfing. But they should more accurately be understood as works of creative non-fiction, which range from commercial short films to Avant Garde, experimental, and poetic interpretations of surfing in Ireland.

In the absence of any framework, in order the build this study - and to explain where this form of production came from – the thesis extends these definitions to key (and foundational) exogenous surf films which feature Ireland as a location (because of their

eventual influence over indigenous Irish films). The thesis also includes mainstream Irish surf films which could be considered part of an Irish 'national' cinema, and other films financed by public funding (*Ebb and Flow*), crowdfunding (*Into the Sea*), and films that lacked any finance whatsoever (*Sea Fever*). The selection of films aims to highlight the aesthetic and formal diversity encompassed exist within the category of 'Irish surf films', but also to highlight the distinct economies within which the films are situated. Other films have been chosen because of their central aesthetic influence on the genre (*Dark Side of the Lens*), but the prime motivation was to highlight the varied political economies evident in the genre.

1.5 - Aesthetics and Political Economy

A central element of this thesis is the argument that the aesthetics of surf films are essential to their political economy. The aesthetic conveyance of euphoria, radical delirium, and phenomenological experience are integral to the form of subcultural surf films. This produces an aesthetic which is arguably representative of cinema in the purest sense, where spectacle, emotion, sensation, and creative editing becomes the central impetus in the filmmaking process rather than plot or even a narrative of linear, sequential events (Smoodin 2017).[2] Many subcultural surf films are therefore performative works of creative nonfiction in which artists attempt to convey quasi-spiritual forms of personal experience. This form of creativity results in in great similarities between surf filmmaking and Avant Garde filmmaking, a concept which will be explored in the chapter on short Irish surf films. It must also be stated that the films described in this thesis are almost all

[2] In utilising the term "pure", I am here referring to the idea of "pure" cinema which emerged in France in the 1930s, embodied by an Avant Garde and amateur aesthetic. This will be referenced again in the conclusion.

examples of subcultural surf films, rather than 'mainstream' films about surfing. Most Irish surf films are produced and consumed almost entirely within the subculture[3]. This form of production promotes "a radically amateur aesthetic that refuses the industrial distinction between artist and market" (James 1996, 225). John Engle (2015) and Albie Thoms (2000) have previously defined the differences between mainstream films which utilise surfing as a narrative backdrop and those produced within the subculture for subcultural consumption. A majority of these subcultural Irish surf films can be defined as indigenous, but exogenous examples of the genre such as *Litmus* (Andrew Kidman 1996) have also shaped their aesthetics and discourses, and for this reason they are also included in this study. Diasporic films and representations have also been influential and are included in the same way that films such as *Man of Aran* (Robert Flaherty 1934) or *The Quiet Man* (John Ford 1952) were incorporated into studies of Ireland on screen, such as those of Rockett, Gibbons and Hill (1987), McLoone (2000), Barton (2004, 2009, 2019), Crossan and Stoneman (2009), and Tracy (2022) (amongst others).

1.6 - Methods of Data Collection.

As Vincent Mosco suggests (2009, 24), the data subject to analysis in political economy of media should include cultural artefacts such as books, films, and other forms of media content. Consequently, the primary data set of the research were surf films, online videos, film posters, events (such as screenings and festivals), and related ephemera. This data was gathered over more than a decade of immersion in the Irish surfing subculture which was underpinned by an ethnographic approach, in which I was both a participant in (as a surfer), and an observer of (as an analyst), the surfing community. As part of this research,

[3] This work takes its definition of subculture from the work of Hebdige (1979) and Thornton (1995).

I collected almost all publicly available surf films produced in Ireland over the course of the past 23 years. I also created an archive of this data, which I hope to pass on to the Irish Film Institute. These films (my data) often originate from subcultural sources that lack the standardized structures typical of mainstream industrial media production, distribution, and exhibition. However, this approach made it possible to conduct a quantitative survey of the films, alongside qualitative analysis of their production, distribution, and financing.

Many of the films were discovered through close attention to surf magazines, social media, public screenings, informal community networks, and word-of-mouth within local surf networks (particularly the North Western region of Ireland). I often acquired physical copies of films by travelling directly to surf shops to buy them, or by buying them from subcultural websites such as now defunct MagicSeaweed.com. I also attended limited film screenings, and sometimes sourced them directly from filmmakers. This method of data collection was organic and embedded in the culture itself, reflecting the informal and decentralized nature of surf film distribution in Ireland. By drawing on long-standing personal involvement and insider knowledge, this approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the subcultural context in which these media objects circulate. It also aligns with established ethnographic methods in subcultural studies, where the researcher's embedded position enables the collection of otherwise inaccessible materials and insights.

This research therefore combines elements of ethnographic and textual analysis to collect and interpret materials which were central to the economies and markets in which Irish surf films circulate. This was essential to explain the varied economies in which Irish surf films circulate and the political discourses that pervade the texts.

Textual analysis of selected films was required to examine aesthetic tendencies—such as visual style, narrative structure, and representations of nature or identity—and how

these are shaped by, and contribute to, the political economy of Irish surf films. This analytical method suited to the research, which include understanding how Irish surf films construct meaning, circulate subcultural values, and interface with broader ideological and economic forces. This involved a close reading of visual style, thematic content, and cinematic form in order to identify recurring aesthetic tendencies — such as romanticised depictions of nature, idealised representations of surf culture, and the privileging of certain gendered or national narratives. These aesthetic choices were not treated as neutral or incidental; rather, they were understood as deeply embedded in, and reflective of, the political economy of surf filmmaking in Ireland. For example, the recurring focus on pristine coastal landscapes and solitary male surfers often aligns with broader marketing discourses tied to tourism, lifestyle branding, and niche consumer identities. By analysing how aesthetic form intersects with modes of production, funding, and distribution, this textual approach illuminates the ways in which surf films both express and reproduce particular ideological positions within the subculture and beyond

The relevance of this approach lies in its alignment with established sociological and ethnographic practices used in subcultural and media research. Long-term embeddedness allowed for access to data and materials not readily available through formal archives or databases. This provided insight into the cultural context in which these films are produced and consumed. Ethnographic sensitivity also informed the selection of films for textual analysis, guiding attention to the meanings and values circulating within the community itself.

This approach to data collection has clear strengths in accessing subcultural materials and producing situated, context-rich interpretations, but it also has limitations. The data set is necessarily partial and shaped by availability, personal access, and the

limitations of memory and informal archiving. Additionally, the dual role of researcher and participant introduces the possibility of subjectivity; however, this has been addressed through reflexivity and critical distance during analysis which are based in Max Weber's perspectives in the essay 'Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy' (1904). This approach governed my holistic approach to methodologies of political economy, and provides the methodological grounding for why the thesis must be systematic and reflective to avoid bias and value-based conclusions.

An example of the limitations to the acquisition of data includes access to financial data. It became clear at an early stage in the research that there were challenges in accessing exact production costs, particularly around films made by private individuals. For example, only two films analysed in this thesis have publicly available box office figures; *Waveriders* (Joel Conroy 2008) and *Between Land and Sea* (Ross Whitaker 2017). Financial statistics are often unavailable because many Irish surf films are often linked to the personal and ultimately private economies of the participants. Far from being problematic, this highlights how these productions are sustained by informal economies, personal networks, and subcultural communities which are based in a participatory and amateur ethos. It should also be remembered that political economy is essentially a form of moral philosophy and a social science which is not always based in exact studies of data or finance. Where there have been challenges to accessing financial information, the thesis has made inferences through recourse to secondary data. It provides qualitative and contextual data to establish its positions, such as public statements, public and private interviews, newspaper articles, and magazine and online articles emanating from the subculture. Without precise costs and revenue data, the thesis instead focuses on sources of funding, such as public funding, industry sponsorship, crowdfunding, and personal finances. To highlight the subcultural networks that aide the distribution and consumption

of Irish surf films, the thesis shows how many Irish surf films utilise community-based grassroots methods such as surf shops, localised screenings, film festivals, social media, video hosting platforms, and streaming media platforms.

Overall, the combination of ethnographic data collection and textual analysis was essential to fully consider the research questions, which aim to uncover how surf films in Ireland function as cultural texts, how they circulate within specific social networks, and how they participate in wider processes of identity formation and economic exchange. This was essential to the study of the political economy of the films.

1.7 - Structure and Chapter Overview

This work is structured across nine chapters. Chapter two provides a necessary overview of the theory of political economy and its application within film and media related subjects. One of the main reasons for undertaking this overview is to clarify what this theory entails, and how it can be applied within this field of study. It is also necessary to describe the theoretical basis for the studies that follow in later chapters. This section will show that most Irish surf films pose a challenge for dominant interpretations of the theory of political economy. It will utilise Paul Dwyer's theory of craft media production as an alternative to these dominant interpretations. Chapter three analyses the unique subcultural politics and ideological discourses that circulate in *Beyond the Noise* (Andrew Kaineder 2017) and *Dark Side of the Lens* (Mickey Smith 2010), which are essential in understanding the highly specific meanings in the films. Chapter four charts the emergence and development of a subcultural economy and market for Irish surf films from 1996 to 2009 in which surf shops, websites, and DVDs dominated distribution. Chapter five examines two examples of

‘mainstream’ Irish surf films that were produced with public funding, *Waveriders* (Joel Conroy 2008) and *Between Land and Sea* (Ross Whitaker 2017), both of which relied on the subculture for their production. Chapter six provides an examination of two crowdfunded films. It will show that both films are representative of an autonomous form of cultural production enabled by online technologies. Chapter seven analyses the varied economies of the short Irish surf film with a focus on four examples produced between 2010 and 2020. Short surf films have become the dominant commodity in this market This chapter will show that there is usually scant profit either for creators, the surfing industries, or for the video platforms which host them. It will show that this form of production is grounded in youth, community, leisure, and lifestyle, and that there is a social nature to the consumption and production of these films. Many of these films are representative of what Thorstein Veblen described as a kind of conspicuous consumption and production, whereby ‘things’ are produced and consumed by a “leisure class” in order to gain or display social and cultural capital (Veblen 1899; Stilwell 2014, 115). This will be further illustrated by aligning Veblen’s ideas with Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of capital and value (Trigg 2001). Chapter eight analyses the role of film festivals in the subcultural economy of surf film production, with a specific focus on the Shore Shots Irish Surf Film Festival, which began in 2013. It will show that small film festivals create distinct networks with small amounts of financial capital but provide social and cultural capital to surfers and filmmakers in the subcultural community. Chapter nine concludes the work.

1.8 - Surf Films, Irish Cinema, and Irish Film Studies.

Central to this research was an aspiration to add to critical studies of Irish cinema and filmmaking practices in a manner inspired by the intellectual inquiries of Kevin Rockett, Ruth Barton, Luke Gibbons, John Hill, and Martin McLoone. These scholars

provided a theoretical basis for the study of Irish representation in mainstream cinema, and for the growth of an emergent national cinema in Ireland from the 1970s and into the 21st century. This analysis expands upon theses extensively researched production studies of Irish filmmaking and Irish cinema. Academics such as Rockett, Gibbons, Hill, Barton, Roddy Flynn, Tony Tracy, and Denis Murphy (amongst others), have traced the development of - and defined the characteristics of Irish film production, exhibition, labour, and financing. In the absence of sustained indigenous film production during the early 20th century, these studies began by tracing Irish representation in American and British cinemas and alongside analysis of indigenous Irish forms of film production (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill 1987). After the growth of Irish cinema in the 1990s, Ruth Barton's seminal text *Irish National Cinema* traced and defined the development of 'national' forms of Irish film production and representation (2004). Flynn and Tracy quantified the output of this form of production (2016), before describing the transition to transnational forms of financing and distribution that began to have a major bearing on film production in Ireland (2017). Barton further defined these emergent characteristics and tendencies in her analysis of Irish cinema in the 21st century (2019), and Denis Murphy has increased the depth of these studies in his analysis of labour in the Irish film industry (2024).

Irish surf films, for the most part, need a different conceptual framework to understand their production and distribution. Whist some examples of 'national' surf films, and publicly funded films do exist, these are considerably in the minority. Most Irish surf films emerge from the subcultural community and have little to no relationship with either national or transnational forms of film production. Since their development in the USA in the

1950s, subcultural (or ‘pure’) surf films have always been local to some extent, but contemporary subcultural communities now engage in a form of exhibition, and distribution, that connects with global audiences. If national cinema can be described as the filmmaking of a specific nation, shaped by its historical, social, cultural, and political contexts, and transnational cinema is the interaction between the industries of such national cinemas, then most contemporary Irish surf films represent something that is beyond these tendencies. In this sense, most Irish surf films should be regarded as operating within a post national framework.

This thesis aims to show that a small but vibrant screen industry has developed amongst the Irish surfing subcultural community. This form of creative practice exists almost completely outside mainstream forms of public and privately funded screen industries in Ireland. This work shows that this filmmaking subculture is grounded in what Michel De Certeau describes as forms of “everyday practice” (1980). That is, a way in which individuals and groups resist dominant power structures with their own tactics. Rather than regarding contemporary subcultural Irish surf films as iterations of national or transnational forms of cinema, this thesis posits that they can be understood as a form of participatory, localised, and community-based film culture which intersects with an international, global subculture. This is facilitated by postnational forms of exhibition and distribution which provide Irish surf films with a distinct form of industrial autonomy.

Chapter 2 – Methodologies: Key models of Political Economy in Film and Media Research.

This chapter contextualises theories of political economy and the application of this theory within film, media, and communication studies. It argues that while dominant strands of media political economy are sufficient to account for most forms of public and private media production, they fall short in capturing the novel modes of production, distribution, and exhibition that have emerged in contemporary surf film culture. This is essential in order to understand the analyses that follow in upcoming chapters.

2.1 - Introduction

Before attempting to analyse the political economy of Irish surf films, this thesis will examine political economy as a field of study in order to outline its origins, key conceptual positions, and its central methodological characteristics. This chapter will isolate key ideas in the application of critical political economy within the often-overlapping fields of film, media, and communications studies. The chapter will briefly introduce the work of key political economists who will play a distinct critical role within this thesis. It will also outline some of the ways in which films, and film production cultures, have been examined within the frameworks of political economy, whilst demonstrating the ways in which Irish surf films can also be approached and analysed from these perspectives. Finally, the chapter endeavours to expose the theoretical limitations of traditional interpretations of this methodology in order to show that contemporary filmmaking technologies, modes of subcultural production, and online exhibition technologies, offer problematic challenges to common methodological tendencies in the theory. This critique is central to this thesis as a means of exploring contemporary social autonomy in filmmaking and media production. Understanding the origins of the concept of political is important because as Barry R. Weingast and Donald A. Wittman describe, "over its long lifetime, the phrase 'political economy' has had many

different meanings" (2006, 3). This statement remains equally true when applied to interpretations of critical political economy in film, media, and communications studies.

2.2 - Moral Philosophy and The Origins of Political Economy as a Social Science

The utilisation of political economy as a means of analysis emerges directly from mainstream, or 'classical' economic theory, and is traceable to emergent practices in ancient Greece, where the term 'economy' initially referred to household management (Caporaso and Levine 1992, 1). This had relevance in "a society in which…wants emerged and the things that satisfied them were produced in the household" (ibid). The idea of 'political economy' would come to refer to the management of the economic affairs of the state (ibid). Vincent Mosco stresses that before political economy served "as the intellectual description for a system of production, distribution and exchange, political economy meant the social custom, practice, and knowledge about how to manage, first, the household, and later the community" (2009, 23-24).

Scottish enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century were central to the modern emergence of this system of analysis, with key roles played by the Ulster born Frances Hutchinson (1694-1746), the economist Sir James Steuart (1712-1780), philosopher and economist, David Hume (1711-1776), and political philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) (Skinner 1993; Aspromorgous 2008; Stilwell 2014). This historical period became associated with 'classical' political economy in which two clear tendencies emerged. The first was the idea of market self-regulation. The second was that of the theory of value and distribution (Caporaso and Levine, 33). Political economist Andrew Skinner describes the relevance of Scottish enlightenment figures, stating that "Hutchinson, Smith, and Hume should be of continuing interest to the student of political economy, not least because they

did not see themselves as economists so much as philosophers who placed the study of economic phenomena in a broad social context" (1996, 109).

The publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), was of crucial importance to development of the field as a social science (Aspromourgos, 1; Simpson-Ross 2010). Smith was a professor of moral philosophy whose ideas about self-interest and the labour theory of value – an effort to establish the value of commodities based on the necessary number of hours of labour involved in production – were essential for the development contemporary of free market economics, including its later neo-liberal tendencies (Clarke 2005, 50). They are also crucial in contemporary critical political economy of media. Smith's importance lies in his providing "one of the most substantial intellectual cases for liberal capitalism as the best possible system for arranging human society" (Aspromourgos, 1). However, as Stilwell notes, "his support for the principles of a market economy was conditional and heavily qualified by ethical concerns" (2014, 65).

These ethical concerns, and the influence of moral philosophy, are a significant influence on the development of the political economy of communications, which is also based on the study of how economic practices influence social and political systems. Other influential figures in the development of classical political economy are English economist David Ricardo (1772-1823), who argued for the development of international trade, Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), whose views on the inevitability of population growth recognised the inherently problematic nature of capitalism, Jean Baptiste Say (1767-1832), a proponent of liberal free trade and the originator of Say's Law, which states that supply creates its own demand, James Mill (1773-1836), founder of the Ricardian school of economics, and his son John Stuart Mill, one of the most important figures in the development of classical liberalist economics (Stilwell 2011, 63). These thinkers had moral and ethical concerns about quickly changing modes of production and the management of

wealth distribution during the great capitalist transformation of the 18th and 19th centuries, which transformed Western culture from a basis of agricultural labour to commercial, manufacturing based, industrial societies (65-66). Whilst they were responsible for the growth of liberal economic ideas, thinkers such as Ricardo and J.S. Mill also analysed the consequences of free market distribution and raised awareness of inequality and exploitation (50); a feature shared by critical political economy in film, media and communications theory.

2.3 - The Marxist Critique

By the mid-19th century, utopians and socialist philosophers such as Karl Marx (18181883) began offering a 'radical' critique of classical political economy and its interpretation in political and economic policy. This came with a particular focus on growing inequalities in wealth and resources between rich and poor, and the vast accumulation of capital acquired by a small number of private individuals and companies**.** Marx actually situated his critique in some pre-existing foundations of political economy (of Smith et al). For example, Marx saw that labour was the main source of value, but he understood that differences in the use and exchange value of labour - in terms of economically dominant and subordinate social relations - could create a system of exploitation. Mosco highlights the main difference between classical economic theory and Marxian ideas:

> Classical theory identified the forces propelling capitalism but tended to view them as natural. Marx sought to situate capitalism within the dialectical flow of history, but with a materialist vision that would break with established tendencies in historiography, epitomized in the work of Hegel, which above all valued the history of ideas, beliefs, and governments or states. In fact, in addition to building on much of the Hegelian tradition, particularly Hegel's concept of the dialectic and his goal of a practical philosophy (meant to fuse theory and practice), Marx took up the challenge

> of revolutionizing it. He would do so by showing how people make history and themselves, albeit under conditions that are not of their own making. For Marx, history meant, above all, how people make themselves through labour (2009, 42).

Marx's critique was radical because it argued that the political and economic system "would have to be changed in its entirety", which became fundamental to his historical critique of capitalism and labour relations (Stilwell, 95). Marx's work is tied to historical articulations of political economy in that it was driven by an attempt to interpret the machinations of a materialist capitalist economy, a desire to comprehend the reasons for economic and social change, and an effort to articulate the principles on which alternatives to capitalism might be based (ibid). These ideas became central to Marx's political economy and the broad scope of this form of inquiry is highly influential in critical political economy of media. It can be seen in highly critical contemporary analyses of the role of new media technologies in contemporary society (Dyer-Witherford 2000, 2015; Fuchs 2013, 2019; Fuchs and Mosco 2016). This scope includes the study of social classes, the analysis of exploitation (of both labour and the environment), the growth of monopolistic power, the expansionary nature of capitalism, the analysis of uneven global development, the commodification of social life, the problems of alienation, the role of the state in economic affairs, and understanding social change (Stilwell, 99). As will be described later in this chapter, Marxian political economy became the driving force in the political economy critique of film, media, and communication studies, whilst also becoming a central strand of the alternate field of cultural studies (Barker 2005, 11-14). Many of these ideas will be employed in this analysis.

2.4 - Neo-Classical Economics and Beyond

Neo-classical economics coalesces as orthodox economic doctrine after 1870, influenced by Alfred Marshall's 1890 book, the *Principles of Economics*. Stilwell states that this "was clearly an attempt to put economics – then newly separated from the fields of history and politics – on a more scientific basis. Whether the result is more scientific or more ideological, showing capitalism in an unrealistically favourable light, is a seemingly perpetual controversy" (57). Neo-classical economics became a singular conservative doctrine focused on national wealth generation, rather than maintaining a relationship with the moral philosophy that originally guided the economics of the Scottish enlightenment, thus "purging the theory of its explicitly ethical aspects" (95). Caporaso and Levine state that "before the 1870s, economics as a system of thought was dominated by the classical agenda: growth, distribution, and the labour theory of value" (79). Neoclassical economics replaced the labour theory of value with a grounding in the idea of subjective utility, supply and demand, and a "dominant, if not exclusive, focus on the markets" (Stilwell, 147). In this outlook, consumers make market judgements based on carefully selected personal utility rather than objective ideas about labour. As a result, subjective utility replaces the important ethical focus on the relative labour put into the creation of a commodity. Labour issues become less relevant than the subjective desire by consumers to acquire whatever commodity they want. The belief in the self-regulation of markets is also a distinct characteristic of neoclassical theory which is encompassed by the idea that markets ensure the "efficient allocation of economic resources" (ibid). Stilwell states that from this perspective, "a world of rugged individualism provides the necessary incentives for economic progress" (ibid).

2.5 - Institutions and Economies

Other critiques of classical political economy were less radical than Marx, but offered equally critical perspectives of free market capitalism. Keynesian market regulation is closely related to the study of institutional political economy, but ultimately forms part of the neoclassical synthesis in 20th century economics. John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) argued that governments should play a distinct role in the economic practices of their countries in the form of market regulation, as opposed to the self-regulatory tendencies of the neo-classicists (Caporaso and Levine, 100-125). In film studies, for example, this can be understood in the expression of government or state support for what are regarded as 'national' screen industries. Institutional economics examines the role of significant institutions in shaping the political economic process, and was heavily influenced by – amongst others - the AmericanNorwegian political economist Thorsten Veblen, author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (1899). Veblen argued that economies were ingrained within social institutions, and that people's preferences (their taste) was based on their desire to maintain social status which shaped their desire for goods and services. This in turn was socially determined by industries which created the demand in the first place (Stilwell, 212). Veblenian political economy and economic sociology, including his ideas about conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure will offer essential analytical tools in later chapters.

According to Bernard Chavance, under this perspective, "institutions matter", unlike in other branches of economics, and its 'common theme is obviously the idea that, since the economy as a sphere of social activity is fundamentally institutionalized, economics as a science or a discipline has to take institutions into account and study them

(Chavance 2009, 75). As a result, the role of the state in institutional economics has influenced studies of the growth of business, mass society, and transnational economic processes. It is also concerned with the influence of trade union activities, and the role of government in the economic activities of the nation (Stilwell, 7).

There is a distinct influence from this critical perspective on the study of contemporary film and media economics. For example, this can be seen in the study of national and transnational filmmaking practices and their role in contemporary modes of industrial film production (Tracy and Flynn 2017; Barton 2020; Bacon 2016; Rivi 2007), or in Janet Wasko's study of the institutional political economy of the Disney company (2020). An institutional approach to political economy engages in the analysis of state intervention in attempts to alleviate the inequality and instability of free market capitalism, such as public film funding. In practice, this can be seen in film culture in the establishment of national film funding bodies such as the Irish Film Board (what is now known as Screen Ireland). Such 'national' bodies have significant influence to support and encourage filmmaking in Ireland in the face of the free market dominance of major screen producers such as Hollywood. In Ireland, surf films tend to emanate from outside the sphere of 'national' creative production, although chapter four will analyse two exceptions to this rule.

Subcultural social institutions can also create demand and determine social preferences based on leisure-based lifestyles, and this been noted by Chris Jenks (2006, 208303). In the culture of surf filmmaking, this can be understood in the way that magazines, technology companies, surf shops, and clothing and lifestyle brands (Patagonia, or Finisterre) can shape surf film production, and their ideological discourses.

This will be examined further in chapters three and seven, which examine the role of such 'institutions' in the production of short Irish surf films.

2.6 - Neo-Liberalism and Political Economy

Contemporary models of political economy also play a role in the analysis in chapter two, including the neoliberal economic tendencies of surf filmmaking, and their often hypocritical ecological narratives, in which surfers are often imagined as being 'at one' with the physical environment. Neoliberalism is one of the defining trends of Western political economy since the mid-20th century and emerged as an ideological response to the crisis of the Keynesian welfare state, "which was precipitated by the generalised capitalist crisis associated with the end of the post-war reconstruction boom…brought to a head by the escalating cost of the US war against Vietnam at the beginning of the 1970s" (Clarke 2005, 58). As Plehwe, Walpen and Neunhoffer note, providing an exact definition of neoliberalism is difficult because of the plurality of views within the idea (2006, 2). Neoliberal policies are a reassertion of classical and neo-classical economic liberalism. It is a distinctly ideological according to Clarke, leaning towards support from neo-conservative and right leaning political entities (57-58). Indeed, David Harvey argues in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007) that neoliberalism equates broadly with an American influenced idea of freedom. Harvey offers a basic definition:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterize by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2007, 2).

Chapter three will show that some surf films arguably represent exactly the kind of practice that Jim McGuigan describes in *The Neoliberal Self*, but that such a severe critique is harsh because of their small-scale economies.

An ecological approach to political economy incorporates the idea that "all economic activity occurs in a biophysical context, using land and other natural resources, and generating products, including waste products, that impact on the environment" (Stilwell 2014, 21). Surfing and Surf filmmaking often ignore of the environmental impact of the practice on the environment. For example, many of the lifestyle-based surfing industries which fund film production are responsible for petroleum-based products that are toxic to the environment, and in most cases never recycled (Serong 2017). Surf films also encourage lifestyle tourism which promotes the development of coastlines as recreational spaces, which causes increased coastal pollution and impacts local wildlife. This will be further explored in chapter three.

Finally, this analysis will draw on theories which analyse increasingly international, transnational - and arguably postnational - modes of production. It will show that networked digital media and contemporary production technologies - such as action cameras, drones, DLSR cameras, and postproduction platforms such as Vimeo - represent a mode of production which reflects changes in the production, distribution and consumption of resources. These ideas will be explored in chapter six which analyses the role of technology in the production of short Irish surf films. It will show that a contemporary abundance of production technologies and online modes of post-production and exhibition allow for the creation of socially autonomous forms of subcultural production which challenge critical political economy of media.

2.7 - The Political Economy of Media and Communications.

> One can think about political economy as the study of *the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources*. From this vantage point the products of communication, such as newspapers, books, videos, films, and audiences, are the primary resources (Mosco 2009, 24).

This section introduces the varied ways in which critical political economy has been applied by scholars in film, media, and communications studies. It also describes the way in which political economy struggles to come to terms with contemporary modes of production. This will first focus on the historical origins and applications of political economy within film and communications studies, followed by an overview of key concepts within these approaches. It will then examine the main ways in which the political economy of film has been analysed by scholars within the field of film studies, but also by communications scholars as applied to film industries. The section will finish by highlighting the problematic nature of contemporary models of contemporary political economy of film and communications. The core tenets of the political economy of film and media studies are important in comprehending the role of major media industries, but they fail to account for recent changes in cultural production and postproduction technologies which have enabled the mass proliferation of amateur forms of online filmmaking (including Irish surf films). Critical political economy of media tends to focus on issues such as concentrated media ownership and 'national' industries. However, in an age of vast and varied forms of cultural production enabled by new media technologies, this approach is no longer analytically sufficient. Outside of Irish surf films, this growth in amateur filmmaking is present in amateur forms of Horror cinema, amateur Science Fiction, and fan made films in other genres, which all utilise under researched platforms such as Vimeo to distribute their films. In Ireland this can clearly be seen in the output of the No WIFI

Collective in County Wicklow, who are an amateur collaborative filmmaking group based in a regional community (Bray People 2018, Mermaid Arts Theatre 2025).

Stilwell's basics of critical political economy analysis include analysing the role between the economy and society, the role of markets, the state, of social class, gender and ethnicity, social capital, and ideology (38-42), all of which will play an analytical role in this thesis. Stilwell states that the key definitions of capitalist production are, private ownership of the means of production, the labour market, the capital market, the land market, the market for goods and services, distinctive ideology, and an expansionary tendency (50-52). Over time, these ideas became distilled into the analytical methodologies of the fields of political economy of communications, and of film studies. Early studies in the political economy of media and communications emanate from the United States in the work of early theorists such as Harold Innis and his 1950 book, *Empire and Communications* and the American economist Robert A. Brady, who was influenced by Veblen's ideas (Schiller 2019, 89-101).

Dallas W. Smythe was the first apply critical political economy to the field of communication in 1960 and had a significant lasting influence in the notion of the "audience commodity" (Smythe 1981). This concept describes how targeted groups of audiences (or users) can be treated as a market to be sold to advertisers. Subsequent applications of critical political economy towards media and communications industries were influenced by Marx's radical critique and American global hegemonic power in the 20th century. Herbert I. Schiller influenced the field in his critiques of concentrated media power and ownership in *Mass Communication and the American Empire* (1969), *Communication and Cultural Domination* (1976), and *Culture Inc.* (1989). Thomas Guback (a former student of Dallas Smythe) was the first to apply critical political

economy to the economics of American film industries. At the beginning of her influential 1999 article "The Political Economy of Film", Janet Wasko (a student of Guback's), references Thomas Guback's 1978 article, "Are we looking at the right things in film?", in which "he argued that the study of cinema focussed overwhelmingly on criticism and theory, with a dash of atheoretical history" (2004, 221). Guback's main point "was that film studies typically neglected the analysis of cinema as an economic institution and as a medium of communication" (2004, 221).

The political economy of film, media, and communications developed in a different way in Europe and the UK than it had in the United States of America. James Halloran was a key figure who headed the centre for mass communication research the University of Leicester and it was here that Peter Golding and Graham Murdock wrote their core work, "For a Political Economy of Mass Communications" (1973). Murdock and Golding's work suggested that "the obvious starting point for a political economy of mass communication is the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organisations which produce and distribute commodities" (1973, 205), and that these commodities have "traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain and accessibility to audiences" (1989, 46). Murdock and Golding's work argues for more than just a study of the mode of production and an analysis of labour. They also regard the study of ideology as central to critical political economy. Their concepts are based in critical applications of Marxian ideas in the analysis of media and cultural practices, and is primarily focused on the notion of the media as a dominant form of control (Mosco, 92). They argue that…

> in addition to producing and distributing commodities, the mass media also disseminate ideas about economic and political structures. It is this second and ideological dimension of mass media production which gives it its importance and

> centrality and which requires an approach in terms not only of economics but also of politics (206207).

In the same year as Murdock and Golding published "Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations" (1979), Nicolas Garnham also published his "Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass Communication" (1979). Garnham, a founding editor of the *Media, Culture and Society* journal, also situated his political economy in Marxian analysis and in the "historically specific mode of the wider process of cultural production" (1979, 202). Murdock, Golding and Garnham no longer agree on the methods involved in critical political economy (Dwyer 2016; Murdock and Golding 2016; Garnham 2011, 2016). This conceptual disagreement will be discussed later in this chapter because of its importance to this analysis. Other important political economists in Europe include Armand Mattelart, who explored the gradual concentration of media power through the prism of transnational capitalism, multinational corporations, and their role in the social inequalities of globalisation (1998).

American political economist Vincent Mosco has more recently attempted to offer a definable and objective framework to the study of the political economy of communication (2009). Mosco has argued that the political economy of communications should also involve the study of history and social change, social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis. Mosco believes that there are three main areas of analytical focus in the study of communications including Commodification, structurisation and spatialization. Mosco's high theoretical framework is mocked for its theoretical detachment by media professor James Curran in his introduction to Jonathan Hardy's book on critical political economy (2014, X-XX), yet his ideas are useful for the analysis of film industries, individual agency, and subindustries in this thesis. He states that 'my conception of communication follows from a general interest to place social process and

social relations in the foreground of research. It therefore begins with the idea that communication is a social process of exchange, "whose product is the mark or embodiment of a social relationship" (Mosco, 67). Mosco adds that the political economist should study ideology and power relations as central aspects of their analyses (68).

2.8 - Film Studies and Political Economy

Thomas Guback's work was built on consistently by Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, and Eileen Meehan. Wasko's influential analyses of film industries and their mode of production is also based predominantly in the analysis of the Hollywood, or "American" mode of film production (1999, 221). Wasko builds an institutional approach to the political economy of filmmaking. Her work is heavily influenced by tendencies in critical political economy which regard media industries, and film industries, as examples of dominant forms of control. Within this system, an emphasis is placed on capitalist processes, industrial systems, private control of property, labour issues, and challenges to the status quo (228). This analysis will employ elements of Wasko's methodology, however it will also highlight that her analysis of film culture does not cater for contemporary changes in production. She states that the political economy of film must "understand motion pictures as commodities produced and distributed within a capitalist industrial system…and view the film industry as part of the larger communication and media industry, and society as a whole" (227). Like Murdock and Golding, Wasko highlights the importance of ideology, stating that "the political and ideological implications of these economic arrangements are relevant, as film must also be placed within an entire social, economic, and political context, and critiqued in terms of the contribution to maintaining and reproducing structures of power" (ibid). This focus on the capitalist hegemony of Hollywood is a dominant trend in the study of global media and

communication and can be observed in Birkinbine, Gomez and Wasko's *Global Media Giants* (2016).

Tom O'Regan highlights that the study of European cinemas as 'national cinema' is quite different to the analysis of Hollywood due the relationship between the state and film funding in western Europe, which reflects economic models in the mode of production. The commonality between these approaches is the focus on centralised and mainstream forms of funding in industrial film production. O'Regan shows that overlapping relationships between political economy in film studies and critical political economy in communications describe cinema as "a textual and aesthetic system, an economic institution, an object of government, and a social institution" (2008, 244). This thesis does attempt to analyse the textual and aesthetic systems of Irish surf films, but such a totalising definition is hard to apply to these films due to their status as form of subcultural production (244).

O'Regan differentiates between what he metaphorically terms "strong" and "weak" applications of political economy of film in film and cinema studies. For O'Regan, "weak" definitions emanate from film studies, whereas "strong" ones emanate from studies of media and communications (245). These definitions are useful in understanding how critical political economy approaches have been applied within film studies. O'Regan elaborates that…

> within this body of scholarship, we can distinguish between weaker and stronger versions of political economy, depending on the accent given and purpose behind the explanations. Film historians and cultural analysts usually undertake weaker versions. Typically, hey investigate particular political and economic aspects of the film phenomenon being studied in order to explain the impacts of government policy, the interaction of style and mode of production, and the shaping influence of consumption upon the production, circulation and uptake of particular kinds of films and filmmaking. Stronger versions of political economy are generally undertaken within communication or related social science disciplines. Here the emphasis is more likely to be on political economy, using the approach to insist upon the genesis

> of the system (cinema) or object (films) in the capitalist mode of production and in the institutions and circuits of commodified production, distribution and consumption (ibid).

This thesis has attempted to unify these positions in its analysis in order to "integrate political and economic aspects of the cinema into broad explanations about the nature and character of the cinema, its films, its institutions, its politics and its markets" (ibid).

O'Regan notes the tendency amongst film historians, national cinema analysts, and cultural studies practitioners, to integrate political and economic perspectives with other kinds of explanation in order to produce multiple and intersecting perspectives on film (246). He describes Eileen Bowser's *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915* as indicative of studies wherein the production, distribution and exhibition of films are set alongside other perspectives drawn from "social, cultural and intellectual history, textual analysis, histories of acting, performance and staging etc" (ibid). These approaches are typically…

> concerned with how and why particular films came to be made, why these films looked the way they did, and why they mattered to historical audiences and critics. The object of analysis here is the history and disposition of an art and/or cultural form. *Their collective concern is for the 'cultural politics of cinema* (ibid).

He goes on to describe this as a 'messy' approach which combines a variety of theoretical approaches which could potentially include a study of a particular mode of production with specific stylistic entailments, the influence of marketing, the centrality of film and TV policy to European film production, or the role of key personnel in constructing a studio etc. He cites John Downing who states that "for many purposes political economy is more a question of insistence on the impact of economic vectors as a matter of empirical

observation than of having a developed…acknowledged theory which illuminates their interaction with other sets of factors" (Downing 1996, 27).

If "weak" applications of political economy display an unwillingness to provide privileged status to economic factors such as the mode of production, or capitalism itself, then the "strong" approach places these at the centre. O'Regan argues that the "strong" approach offers a more holistic view of the theory of political economy. David Hesmondhalgh articulates that only when "weak" approaches are "synthesised into a more comprehensive vision of how cultural production and consumption fit within wider economic, political and cultural contexts that an analysis of specific conditions of cultural production really produces its explanatory pay off" (2002, 36). Within this position, theorists such as Garnham argue that the former approach fails to attend systematically to the determining consequences of commodified production:

> Political economists find it hard to understand how, within a capitalist social formation, one can study cultural practices and their political effectivity – the ways in which people make sense of their lives and then act in the light of that understanding - without focusing attention on how the resources for cultural practice, both material and symbolic … are made available in structurally determined ways through the institutions and circuits of commodified cultural production, distribution and consumption (Garnham 1990, 72).

Hesmondhalgh's critique of this position is that films become isolated from political, cultural or socio-economic conflicts, thus side-lining dominant and subordinate power relations which are a consequence of the mode of production. Wasko argues that to correct this involves studying the "relationships among commodities, institutions, social relations, and hegemony" (1999, 222-223).

This thesis utilises elements of both the "weak" and "strong" approaches, but also critiques aspects of both. For example, as will be seen in later chapters, some surf films are

directly funded by commodity producers, and it makes sense to analyse them from perspectives such as Wasko's. However, many Irish surf films exist outside industrial spheres of cultural production and they are often solely produced in order to acquire cultural and social capital within the subculture. These are more problematic. Both approaches attempt to integrate economic and political fields into social analysis. Both approaches are also connected within a family of closely related disciplines in the social sciences; media, communications, cultural studies and film Studies. All of these disciplines are "dedicated to analysing cultural and media production and associated cultural meanings through a mix of film and media history, sociology and political economy" (ibid).

The main difference arises in the extent to which political economists such as Garnham, Murdock and Golding, apply a determining role of Marxist interpretation in their analysis over the wider variety of modes of analysis favoured by "weak" analysis. Kristin Thompson's *Exploring Entertainment: American in the World Film Market* is an example of a film studies approach that drew criticism for representing "archival empiricism" rather than offering a holistic approach to the topic (ibid). Critical political economy places the cinema (and filmmaking) within the greater realm of cultural and creative communications.

This thesis regards most Irish surf filmmaking from elements of both 'strong' and "weak" positions, but it will show that the strong position is inadequate when describing the emergence of online short surf films, also known as "edits". This problem can be understood in the essentialist focus that critical political economy has historically placed on the role of Hollywood as a central case study to explain the dynamics of media labour (250). There is an equal emphasis in scholarship analysing the role of the state in 'national' or 'transnational' film production, particularly in European countries (and seen in chapter

5). As O'Regan states, "The nation state is typically dealing here with a considerably weaker, more disorganised and fragmented production sector – something of a cottage industry with undeveloped links with distribution and exhibition" (251). Both approaches are inadequate to described emergent tendencies in amateur and online film production and exhibition. This is reflective of the way in which the boundaries between cinema and online video have broken down to such an extent that an amateur surf filmmaker can now produce, film, edit and exhibit short films known as "edits" over the course of a single day (often without any budget) and exhibit their film to a potentially global audience. This kind of 'cinema' mostly exists outside mainstream industrial systems such as Hollywood and the 'national cinema' framework. It is dependent on new modes of cultural (or subcultural) production and distribution, and as a result the subject needs to be examined from the broadest possible approaches to political economy.

As O'Regan again states, "The continuing practice of both versions of political economy is anchored in the very circumstances of the film and media industries themselves. As a result, which perspective is adopted turns significantly on which aspects of cinema and media are being investigated" (253). Whilst a small number of Irish surf films can be examined through industrial or 'national' models of political economy, the majority should be examined as reflective of a new set of socio-technological economic circumstances.

2.9 - Recent Trends

Recent debates on the application critical political economy fall into roughly two categories which highlights tensions in the application of the theory. Firstly, there are scholars that support the Marxian influenced application of the theory, such as Murdock and Golding, Christian Fuchs, Janet Wasko, Eileen Meehan, and Vincent Mosco. Wasko

and Meehan (2013, 150-160) argue that since the 1990s, a number of new approaches emerged in in Film and Media studies. They state that "these new approaches have fallen under various rubrics, including the idea of the creative industries, convergence culture, production cultures, production studies, the cultural economy, and media industry studies" (152). They note that these approaches include "a rejection of political economy as a viable framework for studying the media", which they argue to fundamentally misinterpret and misrepresent the fundamental core of political economy. They include Holt and Perrens media industry studies (2009), and critical media industries studies (part of cultural studies) as a major part of this trend (Kellner 2009). They also note – and disagree with - some of the regular criticisms of political economy, such as the idea that too often focuses on "larger level operations of media institutions, and inattention to entertainment, and an incomplete explanation of the role of human agents" (Havens, Lotz and Serra Tinic 2009, 235; Wasko and Meehan 2013). It is noticeable in this tradition that Marxian critique has become the central tenet of economic inquiry, rather than being regarded as just one potential application of political economy. Wasko and Meehan have argued that Marxist positions are "philosophically and empirically untenable" (2013), but they argue that that…

> does not mean that media scholars can ignore economics…the industries constituting the entertainment-information sector are dominated by private corporations seeking to earn profits from advertisers and from buyers of tickets, electronic access, or physical copies. Within those corporations, managerial, creative, technical, and crafts workers are employed as salaried, hourly, or contract workers - just like in any other industry (Wasko and Meehan, 2013).

The second group of theorists, which include Nicolas Garnham (2011, 2016) and Paul Dwyer (2015, 2019), argue that Marxist influenced applications are theoretically flawed. Garnham and Dwyer argue Marxist applications are based on a temporally specific mode

of production rooted in 19th century industrial culture. These theorists seek alternative explanations of the means of cultural production. This group recognise that historical models of critical political economy which are directly or indirectly influenced by Marx's radical critique are increasingly inadequate for the analysis of networked online culture. These disagreements played out in the pages of *Media, Culture and Society* in 2016 displaying frictions between traditionalist scholars influenced by Marxist political economy and those with broader perspectives.

Writing a scathing review of *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* by the prominent Marxist influenced political economist Christian Fuchs in 2016, Garnham argued for changes in the critical political economy approach, stating that "what is required is not a going back but a going beyond which takes into account the very real theoretical inadequacies of Marxism and the lessons learnt by political economists, and citizens at large, from analysing and experiencing 150 years of capitalist development and attempts at socialist transformation" (Garnham 2016, 294). His stinging critique of Fuchs' work compares Marxist critical political economy to neo-liberalism in its deterministic simplicity:

> The sad irony is that both Marxism and neo-liberalism suffer from the same failure, born of the same 19th-century model of the world. Both systems of thought believe that the economy is a simple, monolithic system and that therefore there is a single, one size fits all, key to solving all its problems and thus the social problems that arise from it. Both parties are deeply economically determinist. Thus, the neo-liberals believe that 'the market', properly understood and structured, does the trick. Their opponents on the left believe that removing the market will solve the problem. Unfortunately, if the last 100 years or so has taught us anything, it is that neither the economy nor society works like that and that in the face of the complex reality, we need to be more modest about what we know and any political hopes based upon that knowledge (ibid).

Paul Dwyer also highlights problematic aspects of critical political of media economy in his 2015 article *Theorizing Media Production: The Poverty of Political Economy.* Dwyer calls for a "media specific theory of production" which counters how labour is understood by dominant interpretations of the theory. This idea is expanded upon in his 2019 book *Understanding Media Production*. For Dwyer, there is a distinct difference in labour between the idea of individual creative production – which he argues to be inherently 'flexible' and motivated by a desire to create – than and labour within industrial systems such as Hollywood. This means that "because creative organisations produce unique products…they have limited opportunities to achieve economies of scale", which is particularly true of filmmaking in the surfing subculture. Dwyer argues that theories of media production needed "to depart from the assumption that the media should be analysed, 'first and foremost', as industrial and commercial organizations" (2015, 1000). Murdock and Golding's vehement response (2016) to Dwyer argues that he misunderstands the basis for their theory, claiming that "there is no need to reinvent the wheel" (2016, 768). Wasko and Meehan also attempted to defend critical political economy of media in 2013:

> From emerging fields … to claim the study of media production in a palatable form for cultural analysts, policy wonks, and the media industry itself. In other words, an approach that isn't necessarily heavily invested in (overtly) neoliberal economics or media economics, nor one that has the taint of Marxism or political economy or a truly critical approach to media industries (49).

Yet Dwyer's work is also influenced by mass industry theories, highlighting that almost all interpretations of political economy fail to recognise the mass availability of production and online post-production and exhibition technologies that have enabled the democratisation of film and media production. Subcultural production also seems to slip

through this theoretical net. On the other hand, Wasko and Meehan argue that whilst changes have occurred, issues in production remain the same:

> Regardless of the particular technologies for distribution and access, media products are simultaneously artifacts and commodities that are both created by artists and manufactured by workers, and present a vision for interpretation and an ideology for consumption to an active public of interpreters who may also be consumers targeted by advertisers or product placements and a commodity audience that can be measured and sold to advertisers (Wasko and Meehan, 154).

Jonathan Hardy has recently extended debates to claim that "any examination of communications that addresses economic or political aspects may be included in a broad category of political economic analysis" (2014, 6). Of the aforementioned growing differences in forms of cultural production, Hardy states that many of the questions asked by radical scholars in the twentieth century remain salient, but that "the contexts in which these are asked and answered are characterised by rapid and far-reaching changes" (4-5). Hardy's analyses of the political economy of the media includes increased attention to the political economy of the internet, and of the continuing cultural impacts of globalisation and transnational media. He maintains that the core themes of critical political economy should continue but argues that changes in production and reception have become so significant that some aspects of the main approaches are no longer adequate. For example, he argues that the historical focus on modes of production, content, and audiences have involved significant changes; changes that this thesis will explore in later chapters.

2.10 - Industrial Autonomy and Political Economy

In attempting to find balance in this analysis between so called "strong" and "weak" positions, it became clear that neither could provide a clear analytical explanation of this topic. The "strong" position is too conceptually rigid in its critique of dominant media

economies. The “weak” position is too focused on the role of state policy and national industries. Subcultural surf films are problematic for these theories because, for the most part, they don’t fit into either category. Far from being representative of an exploitative capitalist system or a ‘national’ form of industry, most Irish surf films are representative of community-based forms of social and creative autonomy.

Murdock and Golding argued that “the obvious starting point for a political economy of mass communications was to recognise that media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities” (1973, 205). This was more recently articulated in an exchange with Paul Dwyer in *Media, Culture and Society*:

> In capitalist societies where the majority of major producers of public communications are privately owned and dedicated to generating maximum returns to shareholders, either by crafting symbolic goods for direct sale or by assembling audiences to market to advertisers, understanding how they are integrated into general processes of accumulation, how they exercise power, and how their strategies shape the communications landscape in fundamental ways, both institutionally and ideologically, is the inescapable place to begin an analysis (2016, 2).

These definitions greatly influenced this work and are fundamental to any critical political economy analysis. But it is inescapable that they lack nuance regarding many contemporary forms of media production. Murdock and Golding correctly argue that capitalism is a structuring force in media production, but this is rooted in interpretations of political economy which conceptualise media as hegemonic. This position is dominated by engrained Marxist interpretations of the labour theory of value, which emphasise potentially exploitative relationships between dominant and subordinate groups. This can be seen in Murdock and Golding’s edited volume *The Political Economy of Media* (1997),

which reflects critical debates in the 20th Century about dominant media, such as industrial cinemas, broadcasters, and press industries.

But the films described in this work are clearly not a 'dominant' form of cultural production. Media production has altered significantly since the 1970s (and the early 2000s), when it was almost impossible for the average person to produce, exhibit and distribute a film to a mass audience. Nicholas Garnham reflected in 2011 that "one of the major problems with work in the field…is that it has remained stuck with a set of problems and terms of analysis that history has simply passed by" (41-42). The "strong" position of Murdock, Golding, Mosco, Wasko et al does make more sense when applied to macro industrial trends, such as the dominant role of 'big' media and the consequent spread of ideological discourse.[4] But even in the realm of mainstream media production, Garnham expressed scepticism about this approach, stating that whilst "capitalist owners and managers might want to control production, they (have) few tools for so doing" (2011, 48).

Alongside private industry, Murdock identifies two other economic models in media production. These are public or state systems of funding and finance (one of the dominant strands of media political economy analysis), and "the third cultural economy", which is characterised by "gifting and collaboration" (perhaps closest to how most Irish surf films are produced) (2011)). Murdock emphasised that in the light of the internet, the latter economy raised "new questions about the organisation of voluntary digital labour, the changing relations between amateur and professional activity, and the corporate push to annex user contributions in the service of commodity production" (Wasko, Murdock, Sousa 2011, 3). This scepticism towards new media is encapsulated in the idea that digital

[4] This can be seen in Wasko's study of the Disney Corporation, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (2020).

media appear not as a primary lever of change but as a "new field of struggle dominated by long-standing battles and combatants" (8). Whilst it can be argued that online media have become dominated by economically powerful industries, this position does not recognise the variety of difference in new media economies. For example, we can rightly be concerned about the hegemonic role of dominant streaming services such as Disney, Netflix, or Amazon Prime. However, it is hard to deny the alternative realities of platforms such as Vimeo, which provides an advertising free content model which sends most revenue directly to the creator, or Kickstarter.com, which allows anyone to raise funds for a film production. It is difficult to regard most of the subcultural surf films in this work, or their relationship with video hosting platforms, as being part of a corporate push to annex user contributions.

Most short Irish surf films are based in an amateur and semi-amateur, collaborative, community-based form of political economy in which practitioners clearly do not feel like exploited workers. Rather than regarding new media platforms as simple reiterations of previous power relations, it makes more sense to recognise that a spectrum of economies exist, with 'big' forms of media on one side, and 'small' on the other (and everything else in between). Murdock and Golding insist that political economy of media restores "the articulation between economic and social investigation and moral philosophy which was integral to political economy's foundational project" (3). But if political economy ultimately questions the ethics of cultural and social interactions based in capitalism, it is unrealistic to suggest that all forms of media production are tainted with an innately 'immoral' character. The central problem with these positions is that they remove agency from artist/creators, casting their work as commodities within vast industrial structures. For example, Vincent Mosco feels that an "emphasis on creativity only obscures a complex process of production" (2011, 360). Production studies are essential, but a sole focus on

labour leads to a rigid analysis of creative media which aggregates all forms of labour as homogenous. This is patently not the case. Video art, or subcultural surf film production, represent different forms of labour to mainstream film production. Dominant positions in the political economy of media overlook the diverse reasons that motivate artists. They also fail to incorporate the role of culture in economic sphere as outlined by political economists such as Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thorstein Veblen.

2.11 - Conclusion

This chapter contextualised theories of political economy and the application of this theory within film, media, and communication studies. It showed that while dominant strands of media political economy are sufficient to account for most forms of public and private media production, they fall short in capturing the novel modes of production, distribution, and exhibition that have emerged in contemporary surf film culture. The following chapters will build on this critique.

Critical studies of Irish national cinema (such as those of Rockett, Barton, and Flynn) have historically engaged in what O'Regan interprets as 'weak' political economy as a means to analyse Irish film industries. This work created an essential historical grounding for the study of 'national' and public systems of Irish film production, distribution, and financing. These studies also offer important examinations of the birth, development, and contemporary status of industrial filmmaking practices in Ireland, and the representation of Irish cultural identity. Yet, as Max Schleser points out in Rascaroli, Young and Monahan's *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* (2014), amateur filmmaking practices in the age of the internet have disrupted traditional forms of film production, providing alternative forms of cultural practice. Many Irish surf films are representative of these forms of amateur and alternative practices in terms of their production, distribution, and exhibition. As such, their political economy differs from

historically dominant forms of Irish cinema and film production as described by Rockett, Gibbons, Hill, Barton, Flynn, and others.

Paul Dwyer's recent critiques of the political economy of media and its relationship with economic realities draw on post Fordist ideas about the nature of industrial economies, citing the idea of "flexible specialization" as a means to explain the nature of contemporary forms of media production. Dwyer's position that political economy should "depart from the assumption that the media should be analysed, 'first and foremost', as industrial and commercial organizations" (2016, 1000) is a grounding theme in this analysis. For Dwyer, regimented industrial systems, such as Hollywood, have become paradigmatic in media political economy, rather than being regarded as highly specific case studies. These perspectives mask the agency of creative artists working in these industries and ignore alternative forms of media industry. Dwyer considers the role of the internet in flexible models of production, referring to the work of Tapscott and Williams (2008), who felt that by the late 2000s a new form of economy had emerged – enabled by new technologies - which favoured disintegration, flexibility, and specialist independent producers embedded in communities of users. This work shows that the internet has thus inverted traditional media economies by "enabling small producers to compete by finding audiences" (Dwyer 2016, 19).

Irish surf films are reflective of these changes. The following chapters adopt Dwyer's theories of "flexible specialization" and "craft theory of media production". This critical perspective allows the work to trace "cultural variables with project production" which "enables analysis of the specific economics of media content" (2016, 1001). At the core of this analysis are the central themes of critical political economy of media, which Jonathan Hardy identifies as critiques of production, content, and audiences (2014, 10-14).

This can be interpreted as a focus on the production, exhibition and distribution of Irish surf films which aims to add to pre-existing critical work on Irish cinema.

Chapter 3: *Beyond the Noise*: The Cultural (or Subcultural) Politics of Irish Surf Films

This chapter describes the unique subcultural politics which inform the political economy of Irish surf films. It examines the distinct social relations that inform the type of novel economies of media production and distribution described in the previous chapter. It shows how these discourses inform the types of film and media production described in the following chapters.

3.1 - Introduction

Since their emergence in the early 2000s, Irish surf films have become an established form of artistic and cultural expression within the Irish surfing subculture, often acquiring national and international exposure.[5] The genre now includes feature films, short narrative films, commercial short films, experimental films, feminist films, community based 'folk' films, and a thriving online film culture distributed on video hosting sites such as Vimeo, YouTube, and Garage Entertainment (a streaming service dedicated exclusively to action adventure films). This is supplemented by a network of surf and adventure film festivals which have provided exposure to the genre, such as the Shore Shots Irish Surf Film Festival, The Doolin Surf Fest, and the Irish Adventure Film Festival. The most recent example is the Irish Surf Film Festival, staged in Galway in November 2023 (Gillespie n.d.). In an era when surf magazines have lost their role as a primary communicator of surf culture, surf films (and online videos) have an enhanced role within the subculture (the most recent Irish surf magazine – *Tides* (2021-) exists as online video).

Irish surf films are part of a filmmaking tradition which originated in the nascent subcultural surf movies of the American filmmaker Bud Browne in the 1950s, exemplified

[5] For comprehensive histories of the surf film, see Thoms (2000), Beattie (2001), Engle (2015), Booth (1996).

by archetypal films such as *Hawaiian Surfing Movie* (1953). This underground filmmaking reached mainstream cinema audiences during the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to films such as Bruce Brown's *The Endless Summer* (1966), *Pacific Vibrations* (John Severson 1970) and *Five Summer Stories* (Jim Freeman and Greg MacGillivray 1972). By this period, surf movies were already an established genre with their own subgenres, transnational variants, aesthetic characteristics, narrative conventions, and countercultural themes. Their popularity waned in the 1980s and early 1990s as surf films became increasingly associated with commercial sponsorship and the political economy of surfing industries. As their cinematic popularity decreased, VHS and DVD became the primary modes of consumption for what Douglas Booth describes as "adolescent fun" (1996). By the 21st century, the widespread availability of digital production technologies and the accessibility of online distribution on streaming platforms has meant that surf films have proliferated in number and in popularity. Transnational examples now exist in such uncharacteristic places as Gaza, Iran, Iceland and Russia, complemented by a global circuit of dedicated surf film festivals often taking place in non-surfing locations such as London and Paris.

The Irish surfing subculture can be understood as a historical offshoot of the subculture which emerged in Hawaii in the years after its American annexation in the late 19th century. This subculture grew alongside the development boom in California during the first half of the 20th century, quickly spreading to Australia, South Africa, the UK, and France (amongst other places). In Ireland, this subculture emerged in the 1960s, led by surfing pioneers such as Kevin Cavey, Roger Steadman, Davey Govan and Bo Vance (part of the 'Belfast crew'), and the Britton brothers of Rossnowlagh in County Donegal.[6] By the 1990s, the subculture had firmly established itself in important centres for Irish surfing

[6] The 'Belfast Crew' were a group of Belfast based surfers who were amongst the first surfers in Ireland. Their story is recounted in Sean Duggan's film *Keep it a Secret* (2022).

such as Tramore (County Waterford), Lahinch (County Clare), Strandhill (County Sligo), Bundoran and Rossnowlagh (County Donegal), and Portrush (County Antrim). As described in Sean Duggan's historical documentary *Keep it A Secret* (2022) and *The Silver Safari* (Angus Hubbard and Naomi Britton 2006), tensions quickly emerged within the Irish subculture between those who regarded surfing as a soulful activity which should remain outside the world of commercial sport, and those who felt that the surfing should be driven by competition, commercialisation and increased sporting codification. These ideological differences highlight that a section of the surfing subculture maintain an ambivalent relationship with 'mainstream' sporting culture, opposing traditional ideas of organised sport and its ultimately rationalist impositions of time and space in the form of competition surfing. Surfing did, however, become drawn into the world of competitive commercial sport through a vibrant lifesaving club scene in Australia and the United States. This led to the establishment of the International Surfing Federation in 1964 (latterly becoming the International Surfing Association), followed by the Smirnoff World Pro-Am Surfing Championships in 1973, and the federation of International Professional Surfers (IPS) in 1976, all of which are predecessors of the contemporary World Surf League (The World Surf League n.d.).

Tensions remain between the subculture's countercultural image and the realities of its professionally driven industrial political economy (Booth 2017). Surf films often aim to embody the ideals and values of the 'soul surfer', yet surf culture repeatedly ignores its potential impact on the environment, its carbon footprint, its often-negative impact on local communities and coastlines, and its potential for the 'spoiling' of untouched locations. These contradictory tensions are encapsulated by the controversy surrounding the environmental impact of the surfing event at the 2024 Paris Olympics and its potential impact on a local coral reef (Eckhardt 2023) This tension can also be observed in an

analysis of many of the surf films produced within the surfing subculture, including those analysed in this thesis.

This chapter attempts to understand the social power relations – the subcultural politics - that define the production, distribution and consumption of Irish surf films. It will critically analyse the cultural politics of Irish surf films, with specific reference to two textual examples: *Beyond the Noise* (2017), directed by Australian filmmaker Andrew Kaineder, and *Dark Side of the Lens* (2010), made by Cornish filmmaker Mickey Smith. It analyses key ideological discourses in both films in order to understand their subcultural politics at the level of gender, race, and their often conflicting environmental and economic politics. It examines their contradictory relationship with capitalism and how they actively encourage the ongoing development, commercialisation and marketisation of places in the west of Ireland – what is now promoted by Tourism Ireland as the Wild Atlantic Way - as spaces for lifestyle sport.[7] The chapter firstly explores the concept of cultural politics prior to the film analysis. It shows how transnational representations and discourses of surfing in Ireland have become associated with the idea of a romantic escape from the commodified world of mainstream surf culture. Finally, it analyses how the subcultural politics of films such as *Beyond the Noise* and *Dark Side of the Lens* display the tensions between the depiction of surfing in Ireland as a countercultural practice and the reality of its position as a transnational lifestyle sport with an industrial political economy.

[7] The Wild Atlantic Way is a marketing term to describe a 2500km long tourism trail on the west coast of Ireland that was created in 2014 by Tourism Ireland. The trail passes through the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry and Cork, where many of Ireland's best surf breaks are found.

3.2 - Cultural Politics as a Theoretical Concept

The critical framework of cultural politics entails the scrutiny of how cultural practices, representations and meanings shape socio-political identities, and how these discourses perpetuate or challenge existing power structures. This conceptual approach spans a variety of disciplines, including cultural studies, film studies, and political economy, amongst others (Wheaton 2013, 7). This article is based in film studies but also employs a sociological approach to cultural politics in order to explain the political economy of Irish surf films. The study of cultural politics is an important critical tool for sociologists and political economists, because, as Kate Nash (2001) explains, it informs the analyst about ideology and power relations in any given society through an examination of political and economic tendencies in the cultural activities and behaviours of social groups. Irish surf films are mostly produced outside of mainstream systems of industrial filmmaking and are predominantly consumed by members of the surfing subculture and adherents of the lifestyle. This analysis will demonstrate that whilst prevalent hegemonic discourses of power pervade Irish surf films, this power is contested, which reveals the nuanced political dynamics of their subcultural power relations. This reflects Nash's assertion regarding cultural politics, which emphasises that "where social relations are relatively fluid, there will be widespread and frequent contestation of all aspects of social life; where there is power, there will be politics. Where there is domination, by contrast, there will be little political activity" (85).

The study of cultural politics can also be understood as a means to understand the political economy of a topic. An analysis of the subcultural politics of Irish surf films allows for a greater understanding of their political and economic dimensions, which can inform the analyst about their modes of funding, distribution, exhibition, and their

revenue streams. Surf films are an important part of the political economy of surfing industries (Booth 2005, 2017) and the subcultural politics of Irish surf films are very often one of their selling points due to their perceived oppositional discourses to mainstream commodified surf culture. A 'cultural' approach to the study of the political economy of film and media is at odds with those who argue that the structural economic function of an entity is of primary importance (Mosco 2009). However, others have argued that to comprehend the economic function of a media object one must also understand its social, cultural and political aspects (O'Regan 2008, 245-246). For theorists such as Vincent Mosco, part of the problem is that a focus on cultural politics can miss larger economic structures and instead place emphasis on individual agency. I argue that an examination of cultural politics actually expands the remit of political economy to include cultural texts, and that this leads to a greater understanding of the cultural economy of any given social group, or subculture**.** Although Mosco defines political economy as based solely on economic analysis, he offers a definition (which this article corresponds to) emphasising the importance of text-based material culture in the analysis of the political economy of film, media or communication**.** He defines the political economy of media as comprising:

> the study of *the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources*. From this vantage point the products of communication, such as newspapers, books, videos, films, and audiences, are the primary resources (Mosco 2009, 24).

Belinda Wheaton attributes many of the founding principles of the analysis of cultural identities – and cultural politics - to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, but notes that the approach is common across a variety of academic perspectives within the humanities and social sciences (2013, 7). This can be seen in the work of Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1976), and Dick Hebdige (1979). Chris Barker

states that the Gramscian interpretation of hegemony is a central theme in cultural politics and that "issues of cultural representation are 'political,' because they are intrinsically bound up in questions of power" (Barker 2003, 404). A contemporary critical focus on cultural politics stems from a desire by sociologists, political economists and cultural analysts to recognise culture as an important contested site to understand where power and meaning are conveyed across society. As Armitage, Bishop and Kellner articulate in their introduction to the first issue of the journal *Cultural Politics*, this involves asking "what is *cultural* about politics, and what is *political* about culture" (Armitage et al. 2005: 1).

Offering a definition, Simon Rycroft states that "cultural politics refers to the tactics and strategies used by social groups, both powerful and oppressed, to express their views of the world. Cultural politics…adopted a notion of culture as a politically contested social construction" (2009, 431). Steph Newell further elaborates that "the term *cultural politics* refers to the way that culture—including people's attitudes, opinions, beliefs and perspectives, as well as the media and arts—*shapes* society and political opinion, and gives rise to social, economic and legal realities" (Newell, 2014). Kate Nash (2001, 77-92) defined this position, arguing for the incorporation of the analysis of cultural politics into the wider field of sociology. Nash argues, citing David Chaney, that "it is through culture that everyday life is given meaning and significance," and that this new dynamic in political sociology would require "an understanding of cultural politics" (77). She further states that "all social life must be seen as potentially political where politics is the contestation of relations of power" (77). Nash utilises Michel Foucault's analytics of power in order to show that "power is plural: it is exercised from innumerable points…and it is not governed by a single overarching project" (81). Nash argued that a model of cultural politics should consider all aspects of social life as potentially political, from the "internationalised state to the lifestyle politics of civil society" (90). David Chaney (1996,

2002) applied similar critical ideas in his work on lifestyle cultures, arguing that the concept of lifestyle is a "good example of a new social form" with its own "sensibilities" relating to how individuals make meaning in the postmodern world (Chaney 2002, 85-86). Belinda Wheaton (2009, 2013) further extended these concepts towards surfing and other "extreme" sports, maintaining that "the allure and excitement of lifestyle sport has been appropriated to sell every kind of product and service imaginable. Indeed, from a commercial perspective, 'extreme' has become a means for corporations and advertisers to tap the lucrative 'affluent, young male' demographic" (2013, 3). The expression of cultural politics can also be understood as a form of performativity, according to Elin Diamond (2015). Diamond invokes Judith Butler's theory of performative identities to show that what is invoked as real or 'authentic' within a subculture is brought about through performance. This chapter argues that the performance of an 'authentic' identity (whether real or imagined) is a key factor in Irish surf films.

3.3 - *Litmus* and the Cultural Politics of Surf Films in the 1990s

Irish surf films such as *Beyond the Noise* and *Dark Side of the Lens* have their origins in a lineage of surf film history that stretches back to the 1950s and the prototypical subcultural films of Bud Browne, such as *Trek to Makaha* (1956), *The Big Surf* (1957), and *Surf Down Under* (1958).[8] Browne made professional what had been an amateur hobby for those who could afford early home movie cameras in the 1930s and 1940s; he would winter in Hawaii, filming as much surfing as he could, before returning to California to screen the films at schools and local auditoriums. Browne would edit, direct, produce and narrate the films himself (Engle 2015, 41-44). Browne's subcultural methods were distinct from the

[8] *Surf Down Under* (1958), filmed by Browne in Australia, is arguably the first "transnational" surf film; a tendency that would become common in the history of surf films.

mainstream political economy of the American film industry and its established modes of financing, production, distribution and exhibition. This remains true of most contemporary subcultural surf films. Surf filmmaking quickly became a popular form of alternative cinema in the United States and Australia (through the films of Bob Evans). Whilst the films were initially produced for a subcultural audience and lifestyle enthusiasts, their subversive qualities meant that they quickly became popular amongst a wider audience. The genre gradually expanded and became more varied and thoughtful throughout the 1970s, leading to countercultural films such as Australian filmmaker Alby Falzon's influential *Morning of the Earth* (1972); a prime influence on the cultural politics of *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* because of its aestheticisation of surfing as a quasi-spiritual practice rather than as a competitive sport. Like Brown and Falzon's films, both *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* are examples of what have been described as "pure" subcultural surf films, in which a sense of the authentic is constructed and maintained (Booth 1996; Ormrod 2009). Historically, these "pure" forms of surf cinema had their own distinct subcultural politics which were often defined by whether the film was representative of the soul surfer/freesurfing tradition (anti-commercial - regarding surfing as a quasi-spiritual, cultural practice), or a more professional tradition (regarding surfing as a competitive sport).

The dichotomies between these approaches to surfing are epitomised in the opening lines of Andrew Kidman's seminal 1996 surf film, *Litmus.* The film opens with an on-screen quotation from Nat Young which states, "I wished that when they asked us 'what is surfing' I would have said it's a spiritual activity, and not just a sport, because that's what

put us on the wrong track".[9] Engle also articulates the tension between counterculture and commodification in the subcultural politics of these traditions, noting that…

> perhaps it's sad, or simply inevitable, that a surfing ethos of marginality and pure connection with the natural world finds itself overlapping with the need to make a living. In filmic representations of surfing…the result has been a cinema of often richly conflicting signals and messages (2015, 7).

Ireland had gradually become a known surfing destination in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly after the staging of international events such as Eurosurf '72, and the 1979 Smirnoff International. The island had also been mentioned in articles by the Irish-American surfer/writer Kevin Naughton for *Surfer Magazine*, but prior to the internet era Ireland remained largely peripheral to the surfing world until the release of *Litmus* in 1996. Directed by Australian director Andrew Kidman, with Jon Frank and Mark Sutherland, *Litmus* was the first major surf film to feature Ireland as a location and it was released at a time in the mid-1990s when the commerciality of surfing as a sport had dominated the culture since its professionalisation in the late 1970s. As Steve Shearer argues, "the siren song of money and high performance had decoupled surfing from its own history, and, more importantly, from the majority of recreational surfers who did it for the love" (2015, paragraph 3). The resulting surf films of the period, often released on VHS and DVD, were "shoehorned between the contrasting visions of Taylor Steele's California shopping-mall punk and the escapist fantasies spawned by the Mentawai Islands gold rush" (2015, paragraph 2). Shearer cites the 1994 Mentawai based film *Surfers of Fortune* (Brian Bleak) as an "example of what surfing had become: parasitic, hubristic, and completely

[9] Nat Young (born 1947) is an Australian former World Champion of surfing who won the International Surfing Federation World Championships in 1966, and the Smirnoff World Pro-Am Championship in 1970. Young appeared in numerous surf films during the 1960s and 1970s, most notably *Crystal Voyager* (David Elfick, 1973).

disconnected from the environments upon which it depended and the surfers who lived there" (paragraph 3).

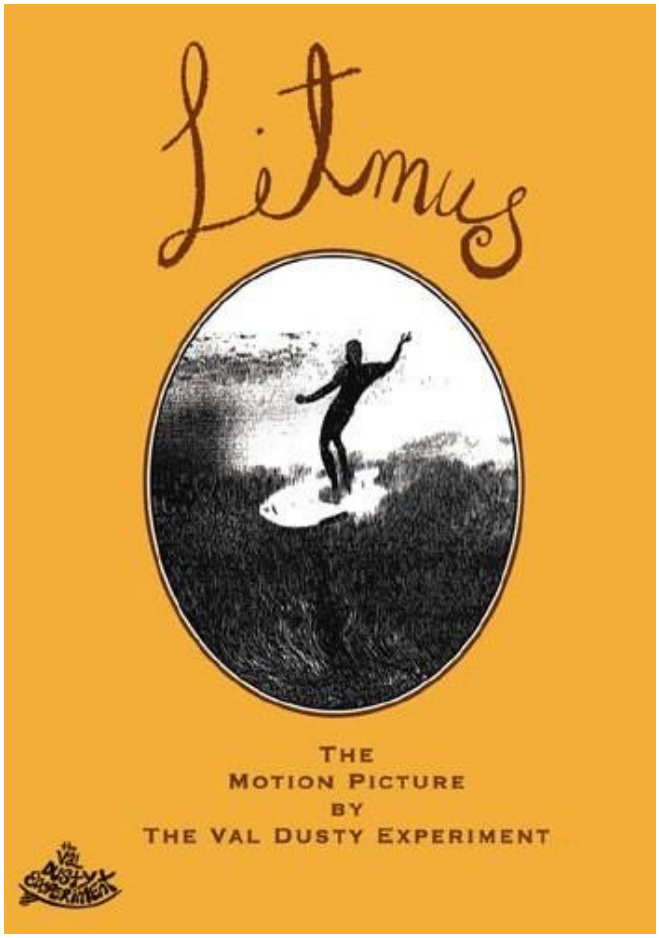

Figure 4: Litmus (1996) film poster. Andrew Kidman's film featured Ireland as a key location and is one of the most iconic independent surf films of the 1990s.

Influenced by the anti-commercial cultural politics of *Morning of the Earth*, *Litmus* is a landmark film in surf film history which espoused the discourse of 'soul surfing' and opposed the increased commerciality of surfing as a sport, and of the surf film itself. It did so in its dark, cold, and grainy aesthetic, which was in direct contrast to the global status quo in surf films, and in its resistance to the what Andrew Kidman perceived as exploitative and harmful tendencies present in the commercialised activities of professional surfing during the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, Steve Shearer argues that *Litmus* "was the first time a surf film had dealt with themes like failure, getting old, finding

and exalting in lineage, history, culture, and self-expression". The film foregrounded "free surfers" and "fringe dwellers" such as Wayne Lynch, Tom Curren, and Derek Hynd. These surfers were known for unconventional techniques, and the impact and creativity of board shaping on the creative development of a surfer's ability, rather than following more commercially driven careers[10]. *Litmus* featured sequences filmed around the world, but one of the key scenes in the film involves Australian surfer Joel Fitzgerald exploring his Irish roots, and riding in empty lineups in a scene described as the 'antithesis' of the surfing world gone awry, where Ireland represented the "anti-Mentawai: cold, powerful, and unhyped" (Shearer, paragraph 20). Released on DVD in the early days of the "Celtic Tiger" economic boom in Ireland, *Litmus* represents a watershed moment for Irish surf culture, and indeed the perception of surfing in Ireland from outside the country**.** In the film, Ireland is cast as a new frontier location in surfing, and as a place representing the opposite cultural values to the commodified and industrially driven spaces of mainstream surf culture, and those destroyed by surf tourism. After its release (quickly followed by Jack Johnson and Chris Malloy's *Thicker Than Water* in 2000) Ireland became an established location for high class surf in a space perceived to be devoid of the ills of consumer driven surf culture. The anti-commercial ethos and thoughtful retrospection of *Litmus* has been an archetypal influence on surf films over the last 25 years. The film influenced a form of anti-mainstream cultural politics which are present in many Irish surf films, including Mickey Smith's *Dark Side of the Lens,* although it does not always reflect the commercial realities of a film's production, as will be seen in the analysis of *Beyond the Noise.*

[10] Board shaping – the ability to make and 'shape' a surfboard – is considered a fundamental aspect of surf culture, combining craftmanship, innovation, skill, and personal expression.

3.4 - The Subcultural Politics of *Beyond the Noise* and *Dark Side of the Lens*

Born in Newlyn in Cornwall, Mickey Smith was part of a group of British and Irish surfers who helped to pioneer the surfing of two extremely heavy waves that are now an integral component of the Irish surfing economy, Rileys and Aileens in County Clare. Both waves are among the most photographed and filmed waves in Ireland (alongside the big wave at Mullaghmore headland in County Sligo), and a stream of professional surfers and videographers surf, photograph and film the waves for brands such as Red Bull and Monster Energy, and magazines and websites such as *Carve, Wavelength,* and *Surfer*. This process is replicated across the international world of surfing and is part of a system which generates income that sustains the economies of surfing industries. Smith lived a peripatetic lifestyle as a surf cameraman, photographing and filming professional surfers and selling his pictures to industry magazines such as *Carve* and the Irish surfing magazine, *Tonnta.*[11] Before directing *Dark Side of the Lens,* Smith had co-produced an Irish surf film titled *From Shadows* (Allan Wilson 2007) and was central to the production of *Powers of Three* (Ross Cairns 2009), a documentary in which he featured prominently alongside Andrew Cotton and Fergal Smith as pioneering surfers on Ireland's big waves**.**

The autobiographical short film *Dark Side of The Lens,* produced by Helen Hayden, was released online on the Vimeo video hosting platform in 2010 and has since become one of the most seen surf films in the history of the genre. It quickly became a cult short film within the Irish and UK surfing subculture before gaining global prominence through its release at a range of surf and adventure film festivals. In 2016, Vimeo listed the film as one of the top ten most viewed surf films in the website's history, with over 2.2 million plays by 2014 (*Carve* 2014) Smith's visual and aural homily to the County Clare

[11] The influential Irish surfing magazine, *Tonnta*, edited by Wayne Murphy, is no longer in print.

coastline is also one of the few surf films ever made which features very little surfing. *Dark Side of the Lens* is a deeply personal film dedicated to Smith's sister, Cherry, who passed away in the same year as its release. The film is a 6-minute-long example of what Keith Beattie (2003) calls the "radical delirium" of the surf film, in which a "melding of documentary and Avant Garde practices" takes place, creating a distinctive aesthetic in surf cinema (this aesthetic will be analysed in chapter six). Smith produced the film with his regular collaborator in cinematography, Allan Wilson, and their film is edited together with footage from winters spent filming at Aileen's and Riley's on Ireland's west coast. Smith narrates the film himself, introspectively reflecting on his own life, career decisions, and the trajectory that led him to his current position as a surf photographer, whom he describes in the film as the 'silent workhorses of the surfing world'. Set to haunting music also produced by Smith, the film features euphoric, rapturous imagery filmed around the cliffs of Moher in County Clare, which depicts Ireland as a primitive, arcadian space, far from the industrial centres of the surfing world**.** As its title suggests, *Dark Side of the Lens* is a film about the act of filming the surf and surfers, rather than the act of surfing, although the aesthetic presence of surfing and the idea of the countercultural frontier surfing life, imagined since the days of Tom Blake and his relocation to the Hawaiian Islands, pervades the entire film.[12]

Smith's film reflects the important symbiotic relationship between the activity of surfing and the desire to capture the ecstatic experiences of surfing in photography and film, which mirrors the same quest as surfer/filmmaker George Greenough in films such as *The Innermost Limits of Pure Fun* (1970). The realities of living the surfing lifestyle during

[12] Tom Blake (1902 – 1994) was a legendary "waterman" figure in surf culture. Born in Wisconsin, Blake relocated to California and then Hawaii, where he befriended Duke Kahanamoku, redesigned traditional Hawaiian surfboards and wrote books about the history of the activity of surfing and of traditional surfboards.

a cold Irish winter as both a board rider and photographer - and its often-scant economic returns - are central to the narrative of *Dark Side of the Lens*. Smith's film rejects the commerciality associated with mainstream, warm water surf culture and stands in opposition to the idea of surfing as a codified sporting activity. The economic realities of this lifestyle are epitomised in Smith's narration, which states that "there's no sugary cliché. Most folk don't know who we are, what we do or how we do it… let alone want to pay us for it… If I only scrape out a living, at least it's a living worth scraping" (Smith 2010). As an independent production and a personal endeavor, *Dark Side of the Lens* epitomises the fundamental ethos of the soul surf tradition in its purest, most 'authentic' form, highlighting that social capital is often more important than economic capital in the subculture. Smith has since made other surf films (with Allan Wilson) such as the closely related and experimental 20-minute Cornish language film *Hunros Jorna* (2022), but the influence of *Dark Side of the Lens* on Irish (and global) surf films has been pervasive.

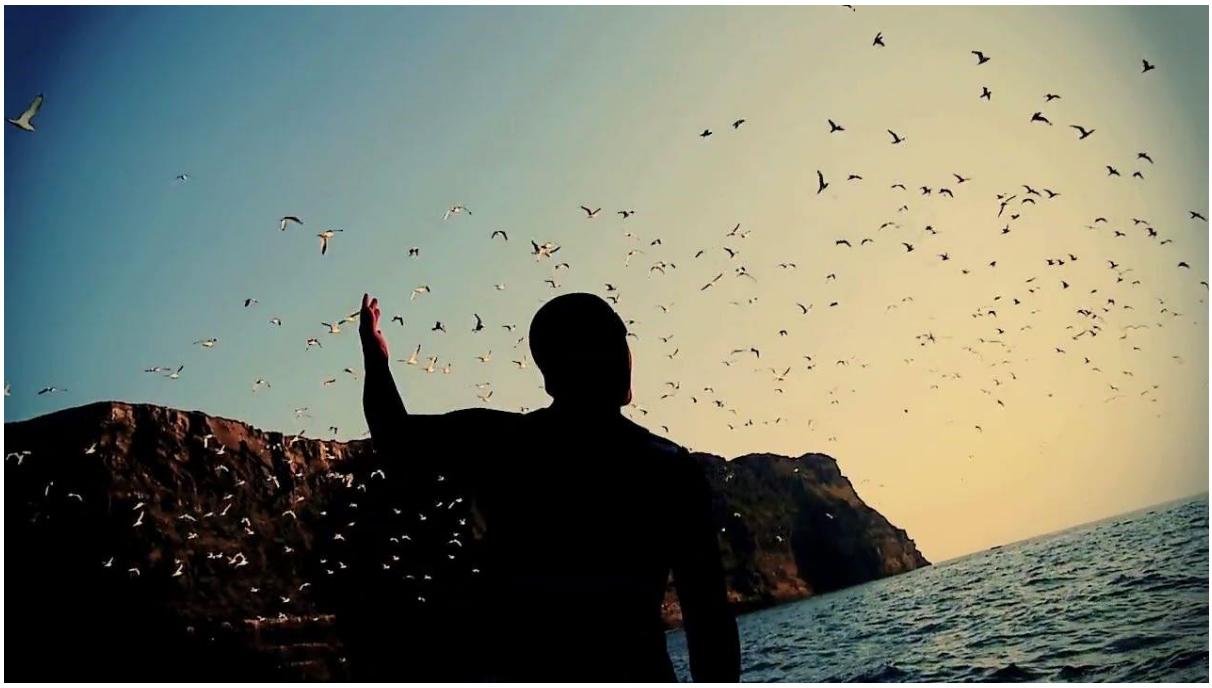

Figure 5: Archetypal imagery in Smith's Dark Side of the Lens. This film would have a major influence on the developing genre of the short Irish surf film.

Arguably influenced by Smith's film, Andrew Kaineder's hypnotic 38-minute-long *Beyond the Noise* was released in 2017 on the Vimeo-on-Demand platform; a pay per view streaming site that allows filmmakers to independently monetise their films, and to connect directly with an audience without the need for a distributer or any associated advertising. It was also released on iTunes, Google Play, the Fetch platform and via the Garage Entertainment streaming service (which manages the rights to adventure and lifestyle sport films in Australia and New Zealand). *Beyond the Noise* was partially funded by the Canon Australia "Show us What's Possible" initiative, which encouraged photographers and filmmakers to push their creative boundaries (Canon 2017), and by the Cornwall based surf lifestyle brand, Finisterre. *Beyond the Noise* was also released with a book of photography by Kaineder, with poetry by Dan Crockett. Kaineder described *Beyond the Noise* as:

> an abstract film about our disconnection and connection with nature, using surfing to simplify the idea. I always want to do something bigger and better each film I make and this definitely challenged me. The deeper meaning goes beyond surfing and I feel everyone will be able to relate to it in some way (Kaineder 2019).

The film is a collection of almost monochromatic, photographic and cinematic set pieces complemented by an evocative soundtrack – and Kaineder's poetic narration - in which Ireland is depicted as an otherworldly space at odds with the outside, industrial world**.** Filmed in Clare, Sligo and Donegal, the film features surfers Noah Lane and Harrison Roach as distant, obscure and enigmatic physical manifestations of the surfers who populate the desolate coastal landscapes of Ireland. From its distinctive opening shot of a surfboard hanging from a tree in winter and a surreal depiction of a surfer reflected upside down in the receding waters of the tide, Kaineder's film is about the desire to escape an urban, modern existence summed up by an opening quotation by Marcus

Aurelius that “what is not good for the Beehive cannot be good for the Bee.” There is an implication, common in a history of romantic representation about the West of Ireland and noted by authors such as Luke Gibbons (2014), that the island is a space which can offer an escape from the shackles of modernity and urban life, and in this case, an escape from more commercialised, competitive, and professional surfing environment of Australia. The film’s title, *Beyond the Noise*, is a direct reference to this idea of escape. Kaineder emphasises this immediately after the title appears on screen by juxtaposing images of an industrialised cityscape, contrasted by images of rural life in the west of Ireland. Enigmatic marketing for the film emphasised the theme of ‘escape’ and attempted to describe the tone of its narrative**:**

> distracted by realities of our own invention, the natural world becomes invisible, technology is our king. As the cracks in society spread, two surfers seek refuge in the vastness of the ocean, away from the deafening clamour of humankind. Unchained and dangerously close to freedom. (Kaineder 2019).

At the core of *Beyond the Noise* is Kaineder’s desire to reconnect with the natural environment and to “get some bloody real experiences” (2019). For the director, the role of surfing in this quest is clear: “surfing is one of the few things that really immerses you into present moment and you actually feel like you’re living” (Kaineder 2019).

Figure 6: An oppressive urban environment in Beyond the Noise, seen as the opposite to Ireland's cold rural arcadia

Figure 7: In opposition to the urban landscape, Ireland is regarded as an escape from modernity in Kaineder's Beyond the Noise

Dark Side of the Lens and *Beyond the Noise* are both highly accomplished and award-winning films, yet their subcultural politics, and those of the surfing subculture, are often contradictory, with problematic structural distinctions. As Sarah Thornton (1995) articulates, "subcultural capital" often emerges from "ad hoc communities with fluid boundaries" (200) and is characterised by the appearance of "vague opposition" (201). In

this sense, subcultural capital relates to the acquisition of status within the subculture through **"**a series of distinctions, or authenticity claims, within the culture (such as the authentic versus the phoney, the hip versus the mainstream and the underground versus the media). However, it is underpinned by structural differences in gender, sexuality, race, class and age" (200). Jensen (2006, 257) also suggests that the best way to understand these distinctions is within the context of the subculture, stating that "the relation between the subculture and its surroundings is best understood by focusing on what is appreciated within the subculture (i.e. subcultural capital) and at the same time analytically situating the subculture in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and "race." Both *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* can be analysed in terms of their performative authenticity claims, and clear structural distinctions and contradictions emerge in their subcultural politics. It should be noted again that Irish surf films exist across a broad spectrum; however, many characteristics in their cultural politics are shared. This can be observed in their intertwined racial, gender, and often contradictory economic and environmental politics.

In terms of gender politics, the historical political economy of surf culture has been predominantly male, with women regarded as "peripheral to the adventure imaginary" (Frohlick 2005, 175; Engle 2018). This tendency can be observed in the masculine ideological characteristics in both *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise*. Both films are representative of a genre that is almost exclusively male, straight, and white. Within the structural paradigm of the surf film genre, certain ideas of masculinity are constructed, performed and reproduced in cyclical narrative structures. This tendency can be traced through the history of surf films from the early performative hypermasculine tendencies of the films of Bud Browne and Bruce Brown, which John Engle (2018) argues served as "an underground debate on the future of an American masculinity abruptly losing ground in the post-war years to the office cubicle, the little woman, and the demanding suburban lawn".

The masculine discourses that circulate in *Beyond the Noise* and *Dark Side of the Lens* can be understood as a recurrent example of a neo-colonial male romantic adventurer trope that has been central to the genre since the earliest days of surfing on film. What Wheaton describes as a "colonial imaginary" (2013, 65) in surf culture has also been noted by Ormrod (2007), Beattie (2001) and Comer (2004), and can be traced to the archetypal Eden-like space in surf movies, the Hawaiian Islands. After their colonization in the 18th and 19th centuries, and their annexation by the United States in 1898, the Hawaiian Islands quickly became the central travel location for young Californian surfers and surf filmmakers following the surfing lifestyle, which provided an "exotic mystique that conferred subcultural capital on the émigrés" (Ormrod 2005, 43). When Hawaiian surf became too well known and too crowded, white western male surfers and surf films reimagined other developing parts of the world - where surfing was virtually unknown - as the new frontier; see Senegal in Bruce Brown's problematic *The Endless Summer*, or Bali in Falzon's *Morning of the Earth.*[13] This neocolonial frontier masculinity is a structural force in surf culture's history and development and it is key to understanding the cultural politics of Irish surf films, as Ireland has acquired the role of a peripheral, virginal frontier space to be conquered by visiting surfers.

Additionally, both *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* are indicative of what Wheaton (2009) has described as the output of "surfing's white tribes". Wheaton (2013, 64) states that "lifestyle sport, both in the increasingly ubiquitous appropriation of its imagery across media and public space and in terms of participants (in the West) is often constituted as a white space". This is true of almost all Irish surf films. Whilst this may seem unjustified in a country with a predominantly white population and in which

[13] For an in-depth discussion of the problematic nature of *The Endless Summer*, see Joan Ormrod's *Endless Summer (1964): Consuming Waves and Surfing the Frontier* (2005)

there isn't a native "Other" from which the whiteness of the visiting surfer is differentiated, Kyle Kusz notes that the whiteness of lifestyle sports is "rarely imagined as a racially exclusive space" (Kusz 2004, 207). Kusz argues that mass media representations of extreme sport in North America throughout the 1990s became key cultural sites in the construction of whiteness, which promoted American values of "individualism, self-reliance, risk taking and progress". Alongside colonial masculinity, these normative themes have been incorporated into the subgenre of Irish surf films, which perpetuate and reconstruct the fantasy of a ruggedly individualistic frontier existence on the west coast of Ireland (when in fact it is a commercialised lifestyle activity which requires significant engagement with mainstream economies and capitalist practices). These imagined white values underlie both films analysed in this article, and this can also be understood in terms of their associations with masculinity, which "re-inscribe the historically dominant version of the hegemonic male adventure hero as 'white, heterosexual, bourgeois, athletic, courageous, risk-taking, imperialist, and unmarked'" (Wheaton 2013, 65; Frohlick 2005).

Aside from their racial and gender politics, both *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* display an unusual and often hypocritical relationship with capitalist practices, which Lawler (2010, 1-16), Stranger (2011, 187-214), Booth (2017, 318-341) and Laderman (2014, 131-153) have all noted reflects a problematic dichotomy in the cultural politics of the surfing lifestyle and in the political economy of surfing industries. A major trope in surf film history is 'the search'; a desire to travel to what are often patronisingly perceived to be undeveloped and unexplored locations in order to find remote and undiscovered waves. The problematic dichotomy behind the search lies in the romanticisation of locations which are perceived to be free from modernity, consumerism, and crowds, whilst simultaneously commodifying the same spaces and ignoring the

realities of local culture. The irony becomes apparent when considering that the idyllic places portrayed as escapes from the commercialised surf culture in surf films eventually transform into commodified spaces themselves due to the filming process, thereby mirroring the very conditions that initially motivated the "search" for such locations**.** As Matt Warshaw (2011, 38) argues of the early days of Californian surfing, "discovery invited 'ruin'". The idea of romantic escape is present in wider filmic depictions of Ireland, but in *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* it is aided by the perception of Ireland in the surfing world as a space largely outside regulation, professional competition and commercialization, which has led it to being imagined as an empty cold-water surfing dreamscape where world weary lifestyle enthusiasts can regenerate. Martin McLoone calls this a form of "outsider romanticism," in which "the west of Ireland now exists as a kind of ideal regenerative environment for the troubled and worried mind of modernity" (2010, 131). Ireland's status at the relative periphery of global surf culture has meant that the island is often imagined as a place of escape and posited as a space removed from the ills of consumerism. This idea underpins Smith and Kaineder's films.

Both *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* owe their cinematic heritages to Alby Falzon's *Morning of the Earth*, in which Bali is euphorically and romantically imagined as a "pre-lapsarian" surfing paradise (Beattie 2011, 118-125) free from commerciality, before becoming overrun by surf tourism in the subsequent decades. Falzon, Kidman and Smith would later collaborate on the spiritual follow up and loose sequel to *Morning of the Earth*, known as *Spirit of Akasha* (2014), which incidentally features female surfers. The archetypal images of surfing in Ireland in Andrew Kidman's *Litmus* frame the island as a similarly bucolic arcadia to Bali in *Morning of the Earth*, in which both islands are perceived as 'alternative' surfing spaces outside the realm of

commerciality and modernity. Peripherality, anti-mainstream discourse, and the depiction of Ireland as a cold-water "Eden" (Fitzgerald 2022) are common themes in *Litmus*, *Dark Side of the Lens,* and *Beyond the Noise,* yet there are problematic contradictions within this narrative.[14] For example, *Beyond the Noise* is funded by the British luxury lifestyle clothing brand Finisterre, who exploit the rugged coastal scenery of Ireland as part of their brand strategy, and the film serves as a form of advertising through product placement for wetsuits and clothing worn within the film. This method of film financing through product placement has been an important part of the political economy of surfing industries since surf shop owner and manufacturer of Velzy Surfboards, Dale Velzy, financed Bruce Brown with $5000 dollars to produce his first film *Slippery When Wet* (1958). This form of brand attachment and Veblenian conspicuous consumption could be regarded as an ideological form of what Jim McGuigan describes as "the neoliberal self," in which consumers adopt a "cool" posture that derives symbolically – and ironically – from cultures of disaffection and indeed, opposition" (McGuigan 2014, 223). Both films posit Ireland as a space far from consumer driven lifestyle industries, whilst reifying the same locations (through the act of filming and distribution) as capitalist dream spaces for lifestyle sports enthusiasts, often the aforementioned young, white, male adventurers.[15]

Mark Stranger (2011, 15) notes that this postmodern "commodification of the sublime" is central to the aesthetisation of surfing in the subculture's magazines and media. This process takes place in films such as *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* through their commodification of coastal spaces. In addition, Irish surf films have influenced a new lifestyle sports based "tourist gaze" (Urry and Larsen 2011) toward the

[14] This is also the title of a recent autobiographical book by Bundoran surfer Richard Fitzgerald, *Coldwater Eden* (Harper Collins, 2023). Fitzgerald has had a role to play in key Irish surf films such as *Eye of the Storm* (Conroy, 2002) and *Waveriders* (Conroy, 2008).
[15] For more on this trope, see Lawler (2011), Ormrod (2005, 39-51). Laderman (2014, 8-40), and Engle (2015, 66).

Irish coastline. This "gaze" is based on the peripherality of Ireland as a surfing location, which inevitably causes the numbers of participants to rise once the locations have been signposted. This form of reification of space proliferates on streaming sites and social media channels, encouraging more and more people to visit the locations in the films and turning coastal landscapes into tradeable commodities. Ormrod (2005, 44) has previously noted the recurrent obsession with peripherality in the surf film and linked this to tourist practices, stating that "tourism is implicated geographically in the 'pleasure periphery,' in which certain geographical locations are designated tourist areas by virtue of their proximity to urban centres."

Whilst both films do attempt to keep their peripheral locations a secret, they promote the comparatively quiet surf breaks of Ireland as a destination, unintentionally aligning with Tourism Ireland's desired marketing image for the Wild Atlantic Way, which itself involves a commodification of place and space. Surf films and online video distributed and displayed on social media channels such as Instagram and TikTok now play a key role in constructing the contemporary tourist gaze in many of the heritage spaces of the Wild Atlantic Way. This will inevitably lead to environmental consequences for the Irish coastline, including heightened plastic ocean waste and the potential disruption of coastal and marine habitats (Serong 2017). The ongoing commodification of the west of Ireland through surf imagery can be seen in an Instagram post (#FillYourHeartWithIreland) for the 2023 Tourism Ireland campaign, which begins by stating that "the island of Ireland is a surfer's paradise...," and features an interview with Irish professional surfer Gearóid McDaid, alongside rapturous imagery of surfing on a sun kissed Wild Atlantic Way in County Sligo (Tourism Ireland, 2023) Although *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* appear to set out to oppose the commerce of modern surf culture (the title of *Beyond the Noise* suggests just that), they equally contribute to the

neoliberal commodification of the public, liminal spaces of the Irish coast. It could be argued that *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* even represent the contemporary equivalent of an imperial 19th century travelogue, in which the lives and experiences of the tourists are deemed to be of far greater importance than the local population.

An analysis of the cultural politics of *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* may highlight how connected they are to dominant ideological discourses in surf films, but it would be incorrect to say that these discourses go unchallenged. As discussed previously, Kate Nash has shown that where there is domination there will be little political activity, yet it is clear that social relations in Irish surf films are more fluid, resulting in the contestation of power. For example, Irish surf films do not represent the monolithic dominant masculine structure that might be expected from a genre so historically dominated by men (Engle 2018); Orla Walsh directed *Riders to the Sea* (2013), a narrative based short surf film funded by the Irish Film Board, which emphasises surfing as a vehicle for female empowerment in the surf. Donegal surfer, scientist, and writer, Easkey Britton is in many ways a star of the genre, featuring in numerous films such as *Waveriders, Into the Sea* (Marion Poizneau, 2016) and Andrew Kaineder's 2018 short film *A Lunar Cycle* (also produced by Finisterre, for whom Britton is a brand ambassador). Alice Rosaline Ward has emerged as a leading young female surf filmmaker and her films *Ebb and Flow* (2019), *Other Land* (2022), and *Oishii* (2023) further affirm the position of women in Irish surf culture.[16] Furthermore, both Kaineder and Smith's films portray a depiction of masculinity that diverges significantly from the hypermasculine tropes often associated with mainstream surf films, from Kathryn Bigelow's Hollywood thriller *Point*

[16] This redressal toward the lack of female representation in the history of surfing and surf cinema, can also be seen in recent mainstream surf films, such as *Girls Can't Surf* (Christopher Nelius, 2020).

Break (1991) to the exaggerated - and real life - male bravado of Stacy Peralta's documentary *Riding Giants* (2004). Additionally, in terms of their inherent whiteness, it is important to highlight, as Wheaton does citing Richard Dyer and Kyle Kusz, that:

> despite its apparent ubiquity and privileged position, whiteness, like other (racial) identities, is multiple, fluid and spatially contingent; therefore, the forms of whiteness that operate in different lifestyle sport contexts need articulating in order to explore if they are, in all cases, sites of domination, superiority and privilege (2012, 67).

This can be observed on the west coast of Ireland, where the surfing subculture encompasses white people from diverse social, economic, cultural, and national backgrounds, to such an extent that the surf community in Ireland can be considered transnational, and even postnational, in its formations of cultural identity (Boyd 2014, 2017).

Wheaton (2013) has argued that "art-house" surf documentary films have been a progressive development which challenge dominant discourses in surf culture, and the avantgarde *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* do just that. Neither film is deliberately exploitative of its locations, as has often been the case in surf film history, and neither film is beholden to the commercial world of surfing industries, regardless of the sponsorship of *Beyond the Noise* by Finisterre. As has been previously noted, neither film is produced as a means to gain economic capital, but rather as a means to acquire subcultural capital for both the filmmakers and the Finisterre brand (in the case of *Beyond the Noise*).

Both films also represent the values of the 'soul surfer' branch of surf film history, which rejects the exploitative political economy of industrial surf culture in favour of an anticommercial and arguably more spiritual approach to the activity. Both texts emanate

from within the surfing subculture and they should be understood as such, with their own distinct signifiers and meanings which relate to subcultural capital**.** Drawing on Nash's work (2001, 78), citing Anthony Giddens' use of ethnomethodology, it is possible to argue that social structures are reproduced in the everyday practices of social actors who are knowledgeable about the practices in which they are engaged (2001, 78); a concept shared by the French cultural theorist Michel De Certeau (1984). For example, as has been noted, a contradictory element in the political economy of subcultural surf films is that they deliberately feature sponsored products such as branded wetsuits or surfboards which, over time, has created the idea of inauthenticity and commercialisation within the subculture. In contrast, Mickey Smith's film eschewed this tendency and the director recognises this in his narration. Whilst Kaineder's film is partially funded by a surf lifestyle company, Finisterre is an ecologically conscious brand – not dissimilar from Yvon Chouinard's Patagonia - which produces sustainable wetsuits and clothing, and claims that "sustainability is key to everything we do" (Finisterre n.d.). Finisterre have also emerged as enthusiastic supporters of surf filmmaking in Ireland, sponsoring and offering prize money to the 2023 Irish Surf Film Festival. For followers of the surfing lifestyle, Smith's aversion to commercial culture and Kaineder's desire to escape commerciality means something symbolically "authentic," whether this authenticity is real or imagined. The importance of these authenticity claims lies in the fact that it is

> one of the defining metaphors of traditional notions of culture. To be authentic is to be true to (consistent with) tradition, or locale, or one's self. Thus something is authentic when it corresponds to how it would have been in its original state or before it had been significantly affected by external influences (Chaney 2002, 84).

This idea of authenticity pervades the cultural politics of Irish surf films and the discourse is central to the symbolic narratives of *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the*

Noise, which counter the perceived inauthenticity and commerciality of mainstream surf culture. For the surfing subculture and those who follow its lifestyle whilst opposing its commerciality, this discourse is tied to preservation of the authenticity of surfing's original spiritual and preindustrial principles. These principles are perceived to have originated from traditional Hawaiian cultures prior to their 'discovery', which thrived before the introduction of the plastics, pollutants and waste associated with modern surfing, and the effects of American imperialism on the Islands (Laderman 2014, 8-40). Irrespective of veracity, *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* imagine the act of surfing in Ireland as something more 'authentic' than in more traditional locations such as California or Australia, where surfing has become more crowded, commodified, codified and regulated as a professional sporting activity.

3.5 - Conclusion

This chapter analysed the unique subcultural politics which inform the political economy of Irish surf films. It examined the unique social relations that inform the novel economies of media production and distribution described in the previous chapter. It highlights how these discourses inform the types of film and media production described in the following chapters. The next chapter provides a socio-historical background the emergence of subcultural Irish surf films in the early 2000s.

John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson argue that the history of sport "is an ongoing narrative of struggle that blends individual and collective action or agency with political, economic and cultural flows and forces" (2002, 8), and that to understand the tensions between these relationships is critical to an understanding of the sociology of any given sport. This analysis has attempted to understand these conflicting tensions in the context of the cultural politics at play in Irish surf films, and to argue that "it is inadequate for social scientists to simply identify power relations" (Wheaton 2013, 18). They must "learn to

understand what the power relations mean to those engaged in it" (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002, 9). In attempting to understand the cultural politics of Irish surf films, this form of analysis emphasises the acquisition of subcultural capital to a greater extent than economic capital. This also highlights the distinct subcultural dynamics of these films in which depictions of surfing in Ireland have become emblematic of a peripheral and alternative surfing lifestyle space, contrasting with regions where surfing is commodified to a greater extent as a competitive sporting activity.

This has not been an exhaustive analysis of the cultural politics of Irish surf films. Other areas worthy of examination include a deeper examination of gender in Irish surf culture, the subcultural politics of online streaming, where Vimeo carries more subcultural capital than other video hosting sites (see chapter 6), and the relationship between cultural politics and the construction of Irish national identity, where there are clear transnational and postnational qualities (Boyd, 2017). At the core of the contradictory subcultural politics of *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* is whether they are – as they imagine themselves to be - representative of true "ways of life," or the depiction of consumer based postmodern lifestyles (Chaney, 2002). This is a relevant question in the cultural politics of both films since "authenticity is important because it concerns the possibility of ethical choices" (84). Regardless of the distinct subcultural meanings in the films and their authenticity claims, it is impossible not to critique *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the Noise* based on their embedded neo-colonial masculine tendencies and an often-hypocritical relationship with capitalism, particularly in the case of Kaineder's film. Referring to the frontier capitalism of Bruce Brown's *The Endless Summer*, Joan Ormrod concluded that "surf films turn the wave into a commodity to be sold to surfer audiences" and that they "make known the unknown" (2009, 48-49). These processes of commodification can be observed in both films. *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Beyond the*

Noise are aesthetically pleasing alternatives to mainstream surf cinema, but they are also performative fantasies for young, white, western, male, lifestyle consumers. Both films pose as soulful expressions of anti-commercial discourse but add to the ongoing commodification of space and place in the west of Ireland, becoming unintended partners to the marketing construct of the Wild Atlantic Way.

Postmodern lifestyles are representative of new reflexive sensibilities by which members of subcultures make sense of meaning and make ethical and moral choices within their communities (Chaney 2002; Rojek 1995, 129). Foundational to this sensibility in the cultural politics of the surfing subculture is what Mark Stranger (2017, 249) defines as the ecstatic, transcendent experience at the heart of surfing, which binds the subculture as a social form. In this sense, "the signs and images of surfing culture are inextricably linked to ecstatic experience that creates an expanded sense of self, anchored in nature and various layers of the surfing community" (178). In its personal narrative and its phenomenological resonance with place, *Dark Side of the Lens* embodies the sensibilities of the soul surf ethos in its 'purest' form, whilst *Beyond the Noise* is unable to escape its commerciality. However, both are cinematically mediated attempts to convey the sublime, and potentially transcendent, sensation of surfing alone during an Irish winter, which is an integral experience in the subcultural politics of Irish surf films.

Figure 8: The opening shot of Beyond the Noise displays the often abstract nature of the imagery

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Chapter 4 - The Emergence of an Irish Subcultural Genre

This chapter provides a socio-historical analysis of the emergence of Irish surf films, tracing their development in the early 2000s to the growth of online distribution. It explores how these films began to circulate in various forms and markets, reflecting a diverse range of production practices and audience engagements. The chapter also examines the emergence of an independent political economy, in which surf films were distributed through non-traditional channels such as surf shops and small-scale, often informal, local screenings.

4.1 - Introduction

What are Irish surf films? Where did they come from? What are they influenced by? This chapter describes the nascent genre of Irish surf films in the first decade of the 21st century, focusing on key texts, themes and conventions in films such as *Litmus* (Andrew Kidman 1996), *Eye of the Storm* (Joel Conroy 2002), and *Waking Maeve* (2010). The chapter will provide a diachronic analysis of these films, with an emphasis on their historical modes of production, distribution, and consumption. This will show how this market transitioned from subcultural DVD's (released through surf shops), and nationally funded television films, to an online culture of film exhibition and distribution. It will further demonstrate how these eclectic films coalesced into a recognisable indigenous generic form. The chapter is based in Mosco's definition of the political economy of communications (outlined in previous chapters), which states that the theory of political economy should analyse:

> *The social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources*…the products of communication, such as newspapers, books, videos, films, and audiences, are the primary resources (Mosco 2009, 24).

Most of the films described in this chapter represent what Booth and Ormrod regard as "pure" surf films (Booth 1996, Ormrod 2009). This so called 'purity' relates to the fact that they emanate from within the subculture, rather than being produced by mainstream screen industries. The chapter traces the development of Irish surf filmmaking from American and Australian surf films of the 1990s and early 2000s and describes the emergent generic components in theme, aesthetics, and iconography. This will highlight a wide variation in modes of production and labour practices, from amateur and subcultural films to professionally produced documentaries financed by public funds.

Central to this examination is the idea that "genres…exist within the context of a set of economic relations and practices" (Neale 2021, 76). Although their economies are small in scale, surf films, "are commodities of a specific kind" (77) and can be analysed as such. But this does not mean that genres always represent something 'generic'. As Edward S. Small points out, experimental film can be considered a loose genre, but it is rare that experimental film is considered generic (2013). This is a key point in understanding the relatively autonomous production culture in the Irish surf film genre. All genres relate to the repetition of forms and a system of expectation on the part of the viewer, cultivated over time until a "contract" emerges between audiences, filmmakers and producers, and distinct codes and conventions emerge (Neale 2021, 72). This chapter traces the development of these codes and conventions in Irish surf films. Many of these films reflect what Beattie calls the "textual offensiveness" and "aggressive primitiveness" of the surf documentary (2001, 344). They are an eclectic body of filmmaking often only marginally linked by the representation of surfing. This creative eclecticism originates in their roots in amateur filmmaking, which challenges formal, professionally trained concepts, instead acquiring diverse aesthetic characteristics often associated with avantgarde or experimental forms of filmmaking (Zimmerman 1986). Over time, these amateur forms developed into

semi-professional and professional forms of surf filmmaking, with its own audiences and distribution and exhibition networks.[17]

This chapter illustrates how subcultural Irish surf films gradually developed autonomous networks for production, exhibition, and distribution, which could be described as a shadow economy to mainstream screen culture in Ireland. It will describe how subcultural production frameworks were already in existence prior to the emergence of short online surfs films which came to dominate the market after 2010. The chapter suggests that Paul Dwyer's critique of political economy can be understood in the practices of media production which exist in the production cultures of Irish surf filmmaking (2015, 2019). Dwyer argued that political economy must go beyond its dominant theoretical traditions to develop an alternative theory capable of articulating the "relationships between media markets…and specific media styles and genres" (Dwyer 2015, 1). This chapter builds on this approach and will show that subcultural Irish surf films are problematic for the dominant theoretical strands of the political economy of media.

4.2 - Amateur Beginnings and the Origins of Surf Films

All subcultural surf films owe their heritage to amateur forms of photography and filmmaking. After the American annexation of Hawaii in 1898 and the introduction of the activity to California in the 1910s, the culture of surfing grew significantly. As did its close relationship with photography. Amateur surf photographers soon emerged, such as Tom Blake (1902-1994) and John 'Doc' Ball (1907-2001). Blake is one of the most important figures in the history of surfing (Warshaw 2003, 65-67) and the first person to create a

[17] The audience for the genre is a regular primary constituency of practicing surfers (Beattie 2001: 337)

waterproof housing for his Graflex camera, revolutionising how surfing was photographed in the sea. John ‘Doc’ Ball is the most influential of all early surf photographers. Between 1931 and 1941 Ball took over 900 photos of surfers and the nascent subculture that grew around the act of wave riding. Ball published an era defining book, *California Surfriders* (1946), which collected 150 of his photos from throughout the 1930s (Ball 1946).

Relatively affordable and light handheld 8mm and 16 mm movie cameras became available to the general public by the late 1920s meaning that amateur filmmaking constituted the vast majority of surf filmmaking during the 1930s and 1940s. Eastman Kodak released the first 16mm camera in 1923, followed by RCA Victor’s first sound-on-film camera, released in 1935. Photographers such as Ball began experimenting with 16mm film footage in the late 1930s (Engle p. 39). Kodak advertisements of the period featured the filming of surfing as one of the exciting possibilities for the new technology. The emergent technologies of the portable 8mm camera, and then 16mm camera, was of similar importance to the surf film genre in the 1950s as the GoPro action camera would be to the genre in the early 2000s.

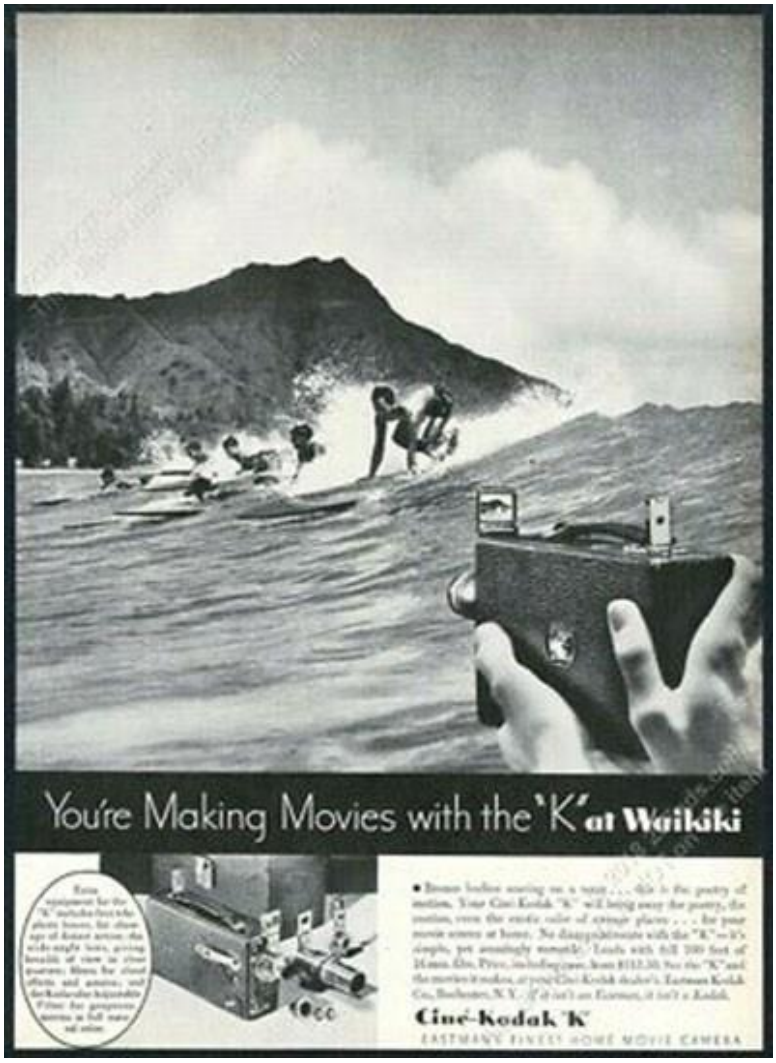

Figure 9: A Kodak advertisement from 1934 which highlights the early relationship between surfing, novel filming technologies, and the rise in amateur home filmmaking during the 1930s.

The first filmmaker to produce "pure" surf films was Bud Browne, whose films quickly attracted attention from within the surf community and mainstream culture (Booth, 1996, p. 313). Browne is revered as the pioneering father of the surf film and creator of the genre. Browne bought a 16mm Bell and Howell film camera to film bodysurfers and surfers whilst serving as a life guard in the late 1940s. He then studied film editing at the University of Southern California. This culminated in the release of his first surfing film, *Hawaiian Surfing Movie* (1953), a 45-minute-long documentary shot on 16mm which

featured Browne's friends and colleagues. This film was first screened at John Adams Junior High School in Santa Monica where "local surfers packed the auditorium and cheered from start to finish" (50 Years of Surfing on Film). This established a pattern of filming in the winter, editing in spring, and screening in the summer. Browne marketed his films himself through handbills and flyers and provided live narration on his films (Engle 42). He travelled widely across California screening his films in recreation halls and auditoriums (ibid). By the end of the 1950s surf films had become a major part of Californian popular culture, with regular screenings of films at schools, cinemas, public halls and private clubs.

Browne's films were archetypes of the new genre, featuring montages of surf scenes with travelling shots to the location becoming a running theme, alongside interludes and comedic asides. He also pioneered many of the filming techniques that became central to the genre. He alternated his filming to shoot on a tripod from both beach and headland, and employed tracking shots by filming in outrigger canoes or boats alongside the waves. Throughout the 1950s Browne became a prolific director of surf movies, producing one film a year until 1964, all costing less than 3000 dollars to produce. Writing in *The Surfers Journal*, Paul Gross argues that early surf filmmakers such as Browne should be regarded as pioneers of independent filmmaking:

> Surf filmmakers…were 'indie' twenty years before the term existed. They were so independent they didn't even bother to work for themselves half the time. They cobbled together low-end 16mm film gear with a desire to earn a living near the water, then made it all work with as little moviemaking expertise as possible (Gross 2001).

The first surf films made in Ireland were filmed as amateur home movies, which continued the trend of amateur production which began in California in the 1930s and 1940s. Some of the earliest Irish filmed surf footage comes from the British surfer Roger

Steadman and a film shot on super 8mm film known as *Limerick Leader* in 1973 (Steadman 2014). Steadman began surfing in Guernsey and came to Ireland when he requested a work transfer at his employer, Unilever specifically because of the potential for good waves on Irelands west coast (Conlon 2007). Steadman met Irish surfing pioneer Kevin Cavey at the now famous surfing stand at the Irish Boat Show in the RDS in 1966. *Limerick Leader* documents a 'surf safari' to the west of Ireland for a competition in County Sligo, featuring images of male and female surfers more reminiscent of the beach-based leisure cultures of Hawaii and California. Steadman's film is the progenitor of contemporary forms short Irish surf films, or "edits" that would become common after 2010, whereby films are shot on digital cameras and edited 'on the fly' before being posted to a video hosting site.

Some of the earliest surf film footage of Ireland comes from material shot by photojournalist Craig Peterson and his *Surfer* magazine colleague Kevin Naughton. This footage was filmed whilst Naughton wrote a magazine article about his experiences in Ireland for *Surfer* Magazine.[18] Naughton travelled to Ireland in 1969, returning in the early 1970s to study English literature at Trinity College Dublin. Their unique footage appeared in the documentary film *The Far Shore* (Gregory Schell 2002), a memoir of Naughton and Peterson's travels for *Surfer* to what were once considered unexplored and exotic surfing locations across Africa, Central America, and Ireland. Peterson's footage displays the west coast of Ireland at the cusp of the emerging of an Irish surfing scene. It is also the first footage to frame Ireland as a pre-lapsarian landscape battered by unridden waves.

[18] *Surfer* was the industry standard magazine of the period founded by John Severson, who directed *Pacific Vibrations* in 1970.

4.3 - Cinematic Antecedents – *Litmus*, *Thicker Than Water*, and *Step Into Liquid*

Luke Gibbons has described how the visual culture of Ireland came to be dominated by images from America and Britain due to an absence of indigenous Irish imagery (1986, 10). This historical tendency is also true in the brief history of Irish surf films, which have their origins in the USA and Australia. Australian director Andrew Kidman's cult surf film *Litmus* (1996) offered the first visual representations of Ireland in mainstream surf filmmaking in a 7-minute sequence grounded in the idea of homecoming and return.[19] This film was distributed widely in surf shops and it can be regarded as a watershed moment for Irish surf culture. The film became an archetypal reference point which would heavily influence how Ireland would come to be represented in later Irish surf films. It also made the wider surfing world aware of Ireland as a surfing location. The 56-minute long film was a reaction to the hyper professionalized surf culture that emerged in America and Australia throughout the 1980s and 1990s in which Ireland is depicted as a virginal frontier space, awaiting colonization and which can serve as a therapeutic space for 'soul surfers'.

Litmus forged an archetypal representation for how Ireland would come to be framed as an unspoilt prelapsarian surfing dreamscape, romantically disconnected from the ills of modernity and consumer surf culture.[20] Kidman positioned the film as an aesthetic and narrative antidote to the consumer driven professional surf culture of the era. At the core of the film is the theme of a perceived spiritual relationship between the landscape, surfer and waves, which is central to the idea of soul surfing. Kidman's film casts Ireland as a new spiritual frontier, similar to the image of Bali in Falzon's seminal 1972 surf film

[19] *Litmus* is actually co-directed by Kidman and with cinematographers Jon Frank and Mark Sutherland – known collectively as 'The Val Dusty Experiment'. Kidman is regarded as the artistic driving force of the trio. [20] *Litmus* can be viewed as an aesthetic bridge between Alby Falzon's *Morning of the Earth* and Irish films such as Mickey Smiths *Dark Side of the Lens* (2012) and Andrew Kaineder's hypnotic *Beyond the Noise* (2018).

Morning of the Earth (a major influence on Kidman). The Irish sequence features Australian surfer Joel Fitzgerald in a fantasy of return to the "Emerald Isle", surfing in south Donegal and Sligo. To add emphasis to this fantasy, the song "Did your Mother come from Ireland?" (ironically sung by English music hall singer, Gracie Fields) plays on the soundtrack, accompanied by images of local landscapes and the obligatory tourist images of Guinness and craic in the local pub. Ireland is regarded as a place out of time, where old ways continue, and "Did your mother come from Ireland?" is even spun up on a gramophone in a thatched Irish cottage to emphasise the perceived timeless quality of the location and the idea of Ireland as 'home' (Holohan 2015, 13-23). John Engle regarded the film's Irish sequence as its most affecting, citing the emotivity of "Joel Fitzgerald surfing waves to fiddle and bodhran off an Ireland that his family left" (2015, 126).[20] Yet it is difficult to escape how similar the west of Ireland is treated in films such as *The Quiet Man* (1952) or *Ryan's Daughter* (David Lean, 1970) in which the island is regarded as a feminized and virginal frontier space to be civilised by masculine outsiders. In the case of surf films, this outsider masculinity is based in white, male, consumer driven lifestyle tourism.

Litmus engages in forms of representation of Ireland common in mainstream film and literature. The Irish coast is romantically regarded as an almost primordial space and the film engages in what Gibbons has articulated as a form of hard primitivism (1987), in which Ireland is both sublime and picturesque; two of the key aesthetic qualities of romantic depiction. For example, in the below shot, a surfer is shot in foreground and the stony beach is deliberately framed with a prominent ruin of a castle in the distance. In a sign of how different *Litmus* was to the surf film genre up to this point, but also how

[20] The film also features a local Bundoran traditional band on its soundtrack, and this is also the first association between surfing and folk culture in Ireland, which is a continuing tendency.

imagery of division and violence were common to depictions of Ireland in the mid-1990s, the film also briefly depicts the political realities of Northern Ireland, featuring fleeting and dreamlike imagery of an Orange parade with marching flute bands.

Figure 10: Litmus depicted the historical realities of Northern Ireland, such as this loyalist marching band.

Figure 11: Ruins in the background and the lone explorer in the foreground - romanticism and hard primitivism in Litmus

It is hard to overstate the iconic aesthetic influence that *Litmus* had on the later Irish surf film genre. *Litmus* established distinct visual signifiers that would come to dominate the genre, particularly in Mickey Smith's short film *Dark Side of the Lens*. This film would in turn have a major influence on short Irish surf films which came to dominate production after 2010. In this sense, *Litmus* began to provide a stable network of signs and visual signifiers within the genre which "are usually held to constitute 'icons' (i.e. signifiers of a particular genre) if they are subject to regular occurrences, i.e. repetitions" (Neale 2021, 74).

These visual signifiers continued in the American film *Thicker Than Water* (2000), which further indulged in Ireland's status as a bucolic fantasy surfing space perceived to be uncontaminated by the ills of modernity and consumerism. *Thicker than Water* was codirected by surfer and musician Jack Johnson and surfer/filmmaker Chris Malloy. Johnson is a well-known professional surfer and an internationally known musician, and he described the film as a "collection of images and memories" (Johnson n.d.). Jack Johnson also released the soundtrack for the film. Malloy is part of a well-known trio of Irish-American surfing brothers who played a significant role in Dana Brown's *Step Into Liquid*, and Joel Conroy's 2008 Irish surf film *Waveriders*.

Thicker Than Water is a documentary made up of a collection of loosely related sequences filmed on grainy 16mm in Hawaii, Indonesia, Australia, India, and Ireland. The Irish sequence lasts for 8 minutes and features the Malloy brothers' 'return' to their spiritual 'home'. The film has no narration, and its editing flits in and out of "snatches of dialogue and off camera reflections" (Engle: 129), combined with images of Irish landscapes in which the sequences were filmed. There is an obvious romanticism present in *Thicker Than Water* which features pre-Wild Atlantic Way imagery of the town and

countryside around Bundoran, Mullaghmore and Ballyshannon. These places materialise after a fade-in from a black and white sequence filmed in New York, which emphasises the agrarian rurality of North west Ireland against the urbanity of the city. Again, Ireland is invoked as an antidote to the ills of urbanity and the outside world; at one point in Ballyshannon a seemingly bemused Brad Gerlach asks a local man called Jim Carr "What do people *do* around here?". The wildness of the location is again emphasized during an unspecified trip to Muckross on the northern side of Donegal bay, which edits out images of the local farms and holiday homes thus constructing (or adhering to) the idea of Ireland as an untainted space. The deliberately selective emptiness of the Irish landscape is employed as a means to imagine Ireland as a symbolic site of 'spiritual' and non-materialistic meaning, with local people scrubbed out. The desire to search for 'undiscovered' locations in surf films has become a generic narrative tendency in Irish surf films which ultimately aids in the commodification of place and space. For example, Muckross Headland is now a defined tourist location on the Wild Atlantic Way, with surfing and rock climbing just two of the leisure activities which have altered the character of the place from one of small rural farming, to an economy based on tourism and leisure. The same combination between lo-fi buccaneering and hard primitivist romanticism would come to characterise many surf films made in Ireland.

Both *Thicker than Water* and *Litmus* were heavily influenced in terms of location choice and more by Bundoran surfer Richie Fitzgerald.[21] Fitzgerald is also arguably the first 'star' of the Irish surf film genre having pioneered the surfing of the big wave at

[21] Fitzgerald recounts his memories of these films in his book *Coldwater Eden* (Harper Collins, 2022).

Mullaghmore Head, in County Sligo. As a result of these local connections, *Thicker Than Water* features one of the first filmed sequences at this secret location.

Figure 12: Surfers on Muckross Head in Thicker Than Water. This location was used to romanticise the wildness of Ireland as a location, although it ignored the houses which are just out of shot.

Ireland – and Richie Fitzgerald - next made a screen appearance in 2003 in a major American surf film titled *Step Into Liquid*. *Step Into Liquid* was directed by Dana Brown, son of Bruce Brown, who had directed *The Endless Summer*. This film grossed $20 million dollars on its international cinema release by Artisan Entertainment (Ryan 2004), and is in many ways a spiritual sequel to Brown's fathers' film. *Step Into Liquid* is a film about the joy of surfing. In its Irish sequence, the film again references the Northern Irish troubles. Dana Brown's film reflects the post good Friday agreement positivity around Northern Ireland and it clearly regards surfing as an activity which eschews associations with Irish national identity. This sequence again features the Californian "Brothers Malloy" (Chris, Keith, and

Dan) in a narrative of return to the Donegal and Sligo coastlines, who tell the audience that if their grandmother didn't sail to the United States, that "they would probably be in a field somewhere herding sheep". Explaining to the American audience the intricacies of Irish diasporic identities, Chris Malloy comments in the film on the recognition of their IrishAmerican status by local Irish surfers, stating that "when we say 'we're Irish!', they just laugh, and it doesn't matter if you're like 100% Irish, if you're from America, you're from America". The mythic theme of the narrative of return is another instance of generic repetition, occurring again in Conroy's *Waveriders* (2008) and *The Crest* (Mark Corvino 2017). Like *Thicker Than Water* and its visual exposure of Mullaghmore, *Step Into Liquid* features many of the then secret local surf breaks around the Bundoran/Leitrim/Sligo borders and explicitly named the wave PMPA (pronounced 'Pampa', and named after the former PMPA Irish insurance company), which would become part of the Irish surfing economy. In the final Irish scene, Richie Fitzgerald and Chris Malloy are seen at Tullan strand engaging in a cross community surfing initiative between Catholic and Protestant children from Northern Ireland. Fitzgerald explains the closeness of Bundoran to the Northern Irish border, and the divides between religious communities. In this sense, surfing is regarded as an activity as that goes beyond national interpretations of Irish identity.

4.4 - *Eye of the Storm* and Indigenous Subcultural Films

The first indigenous Irish surf film differed in its financing and distribution to the traditional political economy of subcultural surf films. Produced and directed by Joel Conroy, *Eye of the Storm* was screened as a 50-minute-long film which was then edited into a 25minute-long documentary for RTE Television [22]. Significantly, the film was

[22] I was provided with a copy of this film on DVD by Joel Conroy.

partially funded by RTE and the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland). Conroy was clearly influenced by films such as *Litmus* and *Thicker Than Water* in both theme and content, and the film put his friend Richie Fitzgerald in a starring role as opposed to the advisory role he had played for *Litmus* and *Thicker than Water*. As chapter five will show, stars are key components in the generic economy of almost all film genres, and alongside Easkey Britton, Fitzgerald was the first 'star' of Irish surf films. *Eye of the Storm* is a kind of proto-*Waveriders* (Conroy's next and most successful film) with the same narrative structure, the same surfers, and a very similar final scene.

The film documents the lives of two friends who both played roles in the discovery of many of the local surf breaks around south Donegal and Sligo; Bundoran surfer and surf shop owner Richie Fitzgerald and professional English surfer Gabe Davies (originally from Newcastle), alongside his partner Lauren McCrossan (who is credited as a writer on *Waveriders*). Davies and Fitzgerald set out to prove that Ireland has "good surf", and spend much of the film discussing the nature of the surfing life. Fitzgerald explains the relevance of Bundoran as a surfing mecca, and the number of local surf breaks in the area, before the film follows his daily routine which consisted of updating surf reports at the The Peak and Tullan strand in Bundoran, before working in his shop or going surfing. Gabe Davies describes the then relatively new role (in Ireland) of the professional surfer which involved constant work and output in order to justify sponsorship fees. Davies criticises the then stereotypical image of the surfer as lazy and laid back, arguing that for a full-time surfer the opposite was in fact the case. In purely sporting terms, the second half of *Eye of The Storm* documents an important historical shift to tow-in surfing in Ireland and some of the first uses of jetskis and rescue sleds in order to surf incredibly large waves than cannot be paddled into by hand. Conroys film ends in the same big wave crescendo as *Waveriders* as Davies and Fitzgerald finally attempt their first ever tow-in surf session at Mullagmore

headland in County Sligo. As the music builds to a crescendo, Davies is filmed surfing the face of a giant Mullaghmore wave for the first time. The film included technically proficient action and water photography at a time when this was far less common than it would become in the following decade, filmed from both land and water (by Tim Nunn), although the film predates the mass use of small waterproof digital cameras.

Figure 13: The opening title of Eye of the Storm

Figure 14: Gabe Davies and Richie Fitzgerald survey Tullan strand in Eye of the Storm.

Eye of the Storm began what would become one of the key generic conventions of Irish surf films by setting surfing against a background of Irish traditional music. Conroy attempted to indigenise the genre through local music, and scenes are accompanied by music by Irish traditional group Kila, whose bodhranist and founding member Rónán Ó Snodaigh is credited as the film's musical director.[23] *Eye of the Storm* also represents a significant change in how the Irish coastal landscape would come to be visually imagined as a space for leisure tourism. Although Conroy's film provided a true picture of the subculture, it also highlighted the difference between mainstream and subcultural productions in its willingness to name and expose surfing locations, rather than maintaining their relative secrecy. Because of its later influence on *Waveriders* and its aesthetic and narrative connections to key texts such as *Litmus* and *Thicker than Water*, Conroy's film stands as one of the most important Irish surf films in the foundation of the genre.

Unlike *Eye of the Storm*, most early Irish surf films emerged from a subcultural market which had developed since the 1950s in the USA, whereby surf shops were the centre of subcultural activity (Warshaw 2005). As surf films became less popular in cinemas throughout the 1980s, surf shops began to stock subcultural surf films on VHS tapes, and latterly on DVD. One location that sold such films in Ireland during the 1990s was *The Great Outdoors* outdoor adventure shop, founded in 1976 and originally with an address on Chatham street in Dublin[25], which had a dedicated surf shop in its basement. Films were – and still are – sold at locations such as Troggs surf shop in Portrush, County Antrim, and the Bundoran Surf Company in County Donegal. Subcultural films were also

[23] *Kila* are a traditional band from Bray, on the East coast of Ireland, with world music influences. [25] This is where I bought my original copy of *Litmus*. I bought copies of *Children of the Norn* (2012) and (*No Boarders*, 2014) on DVD from Troggs surf shop in Portrush. I bought a copy of *Driven* (2007) from Surfworld Bundoran. I bought a copy of *The Silver Surfari (*2007) from Fin McCool's Surf Shop in Rossnowlagh, County Donegal.

sometimes sold in a bundle with surf magazines, or bought on websites such as the now defunct surf forecast website MagicSeaweed.com.[24]

One of the earliest of these subcultural films was a 2003 Irish windsurfing extravaganza titled *Greenie*, a 35-minute-long example of the subcultural film which was released on DVD and sold almost exclusively in surf and outdoor activity shops[27]. *Greenie* was produced and directed by Irish windsurfer Tam Mullen, who featured alongside his brother, Finn Mullen. Their film is indicative of a pre-existing subgenre of surf movies. The film has no narrative, and is purely focused on the depiction of windsurfing set to a hard rock and hip-hop soundtrack. The title of the accompanying music appears in graphics at the beginning of particular surf sequences, similarly to MTV's mode of music and video presentation.

Mullens film is performative rather than observational, and reflective of the type of surf films that became popularised by Taylor Steele in the 1990s. There is little to no interest in landscape, culture, or society. *Greenie* also has no particular aesthetic other than to highlight the surfing ability of the professional windsurfers in the film. This is the purpose of many films within this subcultural market. Professional surfers are featured as a means of generating revenue for their sponsors and ultimately to sustain the surfing lifestyle themselves. Films such as *Greenie* are far removed from the cinematic pretensions of early surf films such as *The Endless Summer*, or *Morning of the Earth*, and reflect the change to inexpensively produced videos that occurred in the previous decade, clearly influenced by music video and MTV culture of the 1990s. The Mullen brothers produced more short surf films over the next 15 years including *Cape Cold* (2016); a film

[24] I bought a copy of *From Shadows: Two Winters One Country* (Astray Films, Mickey Smith, 2007) from Magicseaweed.com. This website was recently bought by Surfline.com. [27] Although invented in the 1960s, Windsurfing is closely related to surfing and surf culture. Both Mullen brothers are central figures in the Irish surfing community.

shot at an undisclosed location in north Donegal. Again, highlighting the differences between the subcultural politics of "pure" surf films, the brothers (Finn, Tam, and Timo) maintain the secrecy of their locations in *Cape Cold*, "in order to protect the area from being overrun by day trippers" (Rogan 2016).

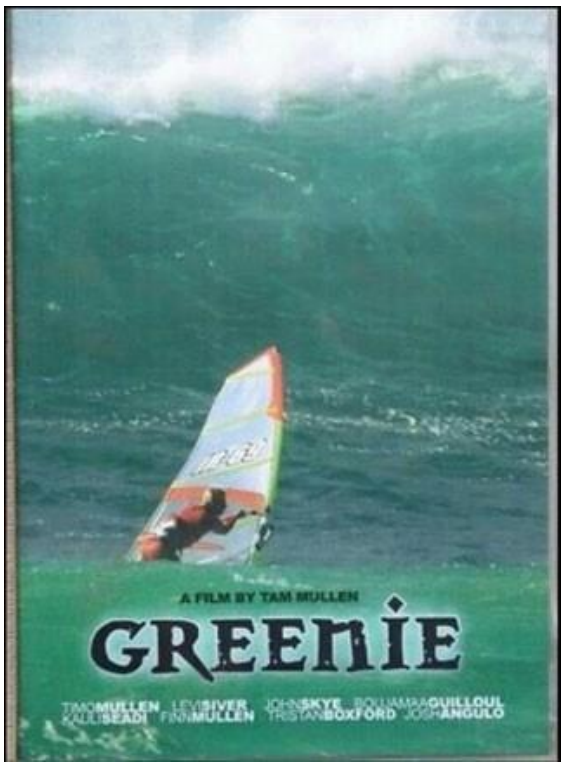

Figure 15: The DVD cover of Greenie

Subcultural surf films regularly began to feature Ireland as a location regularly in the early 2000s, with British surfers and filmmakers caught between utilizing Ireland as an exotic location and a desire to imagine Ireland as a quasi-British location (Ireland and France were historically one of the most common 'surfaris' amongst British surfers). As described in the UK surf documentary *The Endless Winter* (Matt Crocker, James Dean 2012) Ireland was imagined as virgin territory at the periphery of Britain, ripe for 'discovery' by travelling British surfers with often only a vague political delineation between the territories. One such example is a British 'slash and burn' surf film that

employed Ireland as a location and utilised another‘star of the Irish surf film genre, Northern Irish surfer Alastair ‘Al’ Mennie, in a sequence filmed at Mullaghmore. This scene also features English big wave surfer, Andrew Cotton. Cotton is one of the contemporary global stars of surf films, having recently appeared - with Mennie - in the major HBO series *100 Foot Wave* (2021) and Mikey Corker’s *Savage Waters* (2022).

Released on DVD and sold in Irish and UK surf shops, *Performing Monkeys* was reflective of the generic economy of 1990s surf films with surfing acting as backdrop for music, with subtitles informing the viewer of the song being played alongside the names of professionally sponsored surfers. This had aesthetically coalesced by the 1990s into films with sequences lasting the same length as the music tracks which sonically overlay the surfing action with little to no narrativisation.

Figure 16: The DVD sleeve of Performing Monkeys which displays the sometimes absurdist subcultural aesthetics of the surf film.

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In another indication of the cultural relationship between popular music and surfing, the credits sequence of *Performing Monkeys* displayed individual record art and song titles on screen according to scene in which they were played. The film's director, editor, and producer, Anthony Butler, shot his films on DLSR (Digital single-lens reflex) cameras and produced numerous subcultural surf films during this period including *Substance: A British and Irish Surf Film, Driven*, and *Fusion*. These films were technological precursors to the online edits which became popular in the following decade. The films ironic title - *Performing Monkeys* - was indicative of the way surf films had become reduced to featuring professional and semi-professional surfers who were essentially advertising boards for equipment manufacturers and other sponsors (this film was sponsored by sunglasses manufacturer Oakley and *Pitpilot* magazine, a now defunct British surfing magazine).

In 2007, Butler produced *Driven*, which was distributed on DVD and sold in surf shops throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. Describing itself as "truly pioneering documentary", the 50-minute-long film documents some of the earliest big wave surfing at Mullaghmore and Aileens, in County Clare and is a key film in the formation of the genre as the first to document surfing at both locations in the same film. Also filmed with a DLSR, *Driven* was more technically and narratively accomplished than Butler's previous film. Rather than simply surfing set to music, Butler developed a narrative which was narrated in a strong Ulster accent by former BBC journalist Alan Simpson, accompanied by an at times thumping dance soundtrack by Rob Elton. Driven begins in July 2007 at Mullaghmore with the film tracing the course of the year as two surfers attempt to come to grips with the size and power of the wave.

The film profiles the lives of Alaistair "Al" Mennie, from Castlerock, County Derry, and Plymouth surfer Andrew "Cotty" Cotton and their necessarily close personal

relationship as tow surfing partners. Mennie is now very much an iconic star of the genre and markets himself as such on his website, referring to himself as a "big wave surfer - ocean adventurer – blackbelt" and as a "a highly adaptable man with a diverse skill set carved from deep life experience" (Mennie n.d.). Mennie's characterisation as a star of this genre is defined by his 'frontiersman/waterman/explorer' character, which is an iconic and archetypal form of representation in surf films and culture, and an instance of generic repetition in the form. This can be traced to the historic figure of Tom Blake, one of the first white surfers in Hawaii after its annexation. Mennie has appeared in numerous Irish

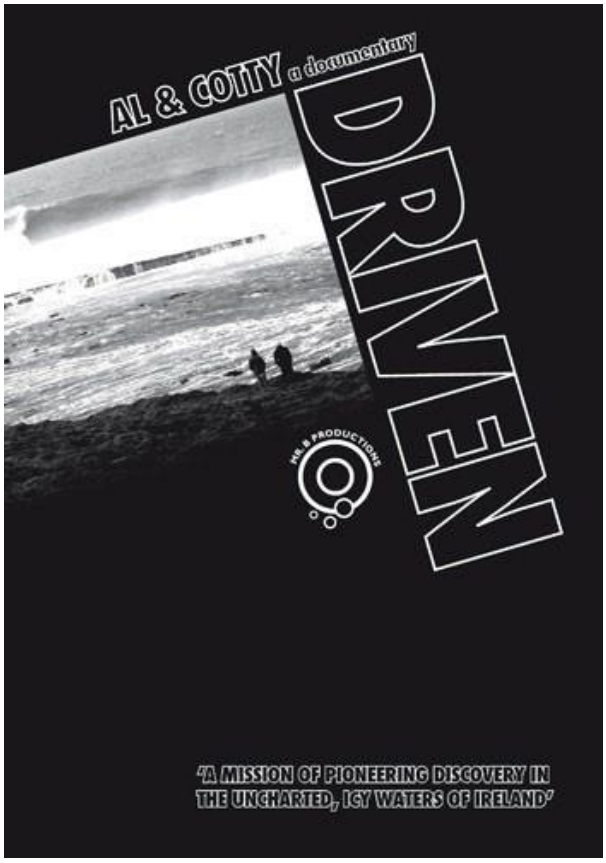

Figure 17: Driven film poster which emphasises the key generic trope of the 'the search'.

and British surf films and has cultivated his mediated performative personality through a presence on social media sites, such as Instagram. He is a model, a public speaker, a writer

of motivational children's books, and also runs the *Man of the Sea* website and clothing brand. Mennie documents his own surfing history in books and audiobooks, and conducts the Swim Through Darkness charity swim, a "Mental Health Campaign Aimed at Raising Awareness of Depression, Suicide and Intergenerational Trauma in Northern Ireland and Beyond" (Mennie 2024). His image has also been used in advertising campaigns for the Northern Irish Tourist board and Discover Ireland.

Driven is an example of the "pure" surf film, produced by and for surfers and marketed through subcultural channels. The film is based on interviews with the protagonists and others about the nature of big wave surfing, interspersed with shore-shot images of Mennie and Cotton mastering Mullaghmore with a jetski. *Driven* eschews the romantic idea of surfing, choosing to depict the realities of surfing in Ireland, and the danger of big wave surfing, alongside a myriad of other factors such as stormy weather and serious injuries. In one scene Butler films Andrew Cotton's jetski falling over the top of a giant wave with Cotton having to bail out, resulting in a broken collar bone caused by the force of the breaking wave. The film also has a sequence filmed in 2006 at Aileens featuring surfers from The H30 project; a collective of surfers, photographers and filmmakers whose goal was to master the then relatively new wave at Aileens in County Clare. This famous session was depicted in numerous Irish surf films of the period, such as *Waveriders* and *Sea Fever*. One of the most expressive sequences reflecting the radical delirium of surf cinema is filmed at Crab Island with dolphins riding waves with a surfer prior to the conquering of huge surf at Aileens.

Driven ends with the hint of a new undiscovered country beyond the waves of Mullaghmore and Aileens. Alongside the 'boys own' adventure theme of the film, this quest for the undiscovered country are arguably historical remnants of the colonial

narratives of Victorian England, and the masculine British adventure fiction of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kestner, 2016). With no countries left to conquer, adventurers progressed into the conquering of extreme locations, and when these locations ran out, the conquering of the unknown was left to white leisure activity practitioners such as surfers, skiers, and rock climbers**.** This desire is evident in the clearly untrue statement on the film's poster (packaged with the DVD), which claims to feature surfing in the "uncharted waters" of Ireland; a statement which reflects an almost colonial attitude about Ireland's exotic mystique. It also ignores 41 years of surfing in Ireland by Irish surfers which preceded the film. Although *Driven* feels like an adolescent adventure, it retains significant importance as a historical document of an important period of surfing in Ireland.

4.5 - Broadcast television in the distribution of *The Silver Surfari* and *Sea Fever*

In addition to the aforementioned *Eye of the Storm*, which was funded by both RTE and the Irish Film Board, one of the most significant Irish surf films screened on television during this period was *The Silver Surfari*, an accomplished 51-minute-long documentary created and produced by Naomi Britton and directed and edited by Angus Hubbard in 2006. Britton is an 'insider' to the surfing subculture as a member of the famous Britton surfing family of South Donegal. Britton's film was subtitled "Rediscovering 40 years of Irish Surfing" and released at a time when surfing numbers had grown dramatically, but with many new surfers unaware of the history of Irish surfing, or the discourses which influenced and informed the emergent subculture.

Supported by the then Irish Film Board and RTE (the Irish national public broadcaster), *The Silver Surfari* is a documentary about a reunion of Irish surfers from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The film tells the 40-year history of surfing in Ireland,

recounting key formative events, such as the Eurosurf '72 contest and the controversy around the 1979 Smirnoff International. The 'surfari' referred to in the title is a reference to the original Irish surfing road trip, taken by Kevin Cavey, Roger Steadman and others, on the west coast from Lahinch, County Clare, to Rossnowlagh in County Donegal. Britton's film begins with the enthusiastic Cavey recounting the now oft repeated story of how he once saw a copy of *The Readers Digest* with a surfer on a wave and realized that the same could be done in Ireland.[25] Cavey wrote the first history of Irish surfing, albeit subjective, in *How Green Was Their Wave: The Origins of Irish Surfing* (2017). *The Silver Surfari* helps to mythologise Cavey's story from the fashioning of his own board, to his founding of The Bray Surf Club and his display of surfboards at the RDS boat show, to the first surfing safaris on the west coast. Cavey was Irelands first entrant to the world surfing championships in 1966, after which he initiated the Irish national surf competition.

Britton follows the gradual codification and sportification of Irish surfing, with the founding of the Irish Surfing Association in 1970 and the staging of the Eurosurf '72' event in Lahinch. Events are brought to the screen by the creative use of personal archives, 8mm and 16 mm film footage, and period photographs taken by the participants in the documentary (including footage shot by Naughton and Peterson). *The Silver Surfari* highlights many of the male surfers of the period, such as Kevin Naughton, Hughie O'Brien Moran. Johnny Lee, Alan Rich, and Desmond 'Bo' Vance, but it is also the first Irish surf film to offer evidence of women as active participants. Equally, the film depicts the perspectives of women who were left behind whilst their male partners spent their time surfing. Britton features an interview with Vivienne Evans, who was Ireland's first female surfer, and includes an interview with Judy Vance who describes her discomfort and

[25] Much of the same history was covered in *Keep it a Secret*.

annoyance at her husbands' disappearances. The film also features an emergent star of the Irish surf film genre, a youthful Easkey Britton discussing her views on competition surfing with her father, Barry.

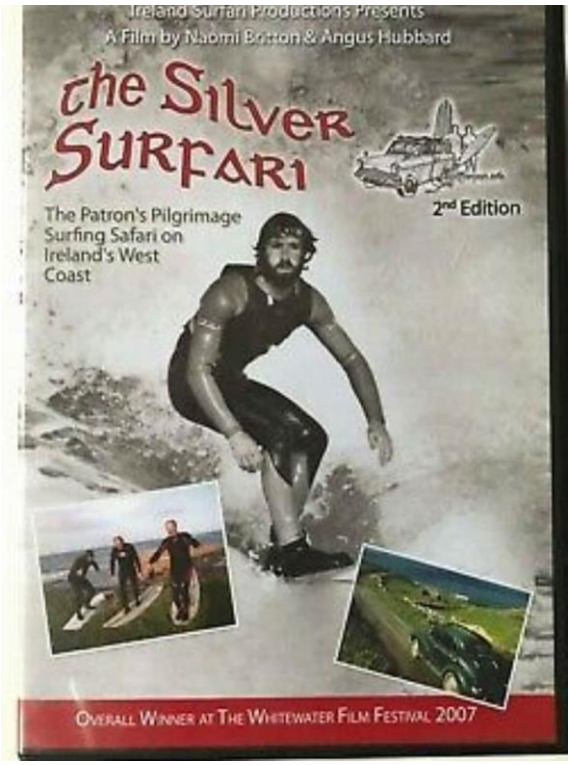

Figure 18: The Silver Surfari DVD release.

The Silver Surfari falls somewhere between a subcultural film and a mainstream film aimed at a wider audience. It maintains the key generic trait of extended scenes of surfing set to music (with water photography by Alex Hill), and Britton situates surfing as a countercultural activity which opposed the repressive discourses in Irish society during the 1960s. The documentary provides an astute understanding of the early countercultural discourses at the heart of Irish surf culture. Like Sean Duggan's *Keep it a Secret* (2022), the film draws attention to the apolitical role of surfing as a means of subcultural unification during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In a segment on the staging of surf

competitions during the Troubles, one surfer is quoted as saying, “The only things surfers care about is the surf, and we don’t give a damn about politics”.

Another segment allows Kevin Naughton to elucidate on the idea of Ireland in the surfing imagination, which was at the heart of the aforementioned representations such as *Litmus* and *Thicker Than Water*. Naughton states “there’s a big thing in surfing about a secret spot, or having a secret spot. Having a whole country like Ireland as a secret spot, that’s something”. The film describes how for surfers attempting to escape the crowded scenes in California and Cornwall, Ireland became a quasi-mythical surfing space free from commercialism. Importantly, the film documents the reaction during the 1970s to increasing numbers of surfers in the water and the gradual corporatisation of the activity. This anticapitalist ‘soul surfer’ mentality caused a major protest at the 1979 Smirnoff Irish International Surfing Championships, an event that many felt would take Irish surfing too far from its roots as a subcultural practice. A large banner was unfurled at Easkey Castle which read, “I enjoyed surfing until I discovered Smirnoff”, and many local surfers continued to surf during the competition, which had sealed off the beach space solely for competitors,

Figure 19: Resistance to sponsored competitions and the influence of capitalism in the discourse of Irish surfing.

These actions caused a rift between many in the Irish surfing community, including between Britton brothers Brian (an associate producer of the film) and Barry. Brian became an internationally known surfing administrator – and one of the first to suggest surfing as an Olympic sport. Barry Britton rejected competition and professional surfing to become an artist and soul surfer based near Rossnowlagh. This focus is important because it highlights a split in the ideological discourses of surfing in Ireland and the emergence of a 'soul surfer' ideology which rejected the idea that public spaces could be shut down to allow for private competition. In archive news footage, Brian Britton recognised the basic truth of the issue stating in archive footage that "Surfing is a selfish and individualistic sport and surfers don't like seeing their waves encroached on", whilst Naughton notes his disagreement with the anti-competition protest, noting that "competition is the bread and butter of professional surfing".

Some key generic themes emerged from this film, in particular regarding the recounting of the local history of surfing, and interviews with the surfing community in which they tell stories about themselves to themselves is another consistent narrative theme of the genre. This provides a ritualistic aspect to the genre in the paying of respects to the deeds of previous generations of surfers in order to disseminate the present. Unlike *Eye of the Storm*, Britton retains the secrecy of many of the locations involved. Interestingly, the English surfer Roger Steadman and the 'Belfast crew' are barely mentioned in the film, but would receive more recognition in Sean Duggans 2022 documentary *Keep it a Secret***.** The glossing over of the influence of Northern Irish surfing history can also be argued to take place in the international release of *Waveriders* (see chapter 4).

Lahinch based filmmaker and conservationist Ken O'Sullivan's first film *Sea Fever: An Irish Surf Odyssey* (2007) offered a far more contemporary portrait of those living the contemporary surfing life in and around Lahinch and West Clare. O'Sullivan began filming the 1-hour long *Sea Fever* in 2005 and it is a clear influence on Ross Whitaker's 2016 long form surf film *Between Land and Sea* (analysed in the following chapter). *Sea Fever* was also a precursor to O'Sullivan's later work as one of Ireland's best-known water-based cameramen. The film was produced with no funding, before eventually being broadcast on the publicly funded Irish language television channel Teilifís na Gaeilge (TG4) in 2009. Sea Fever was sold widely on DVD in the Republic of Ireland, and is still available to buy from Sullivan's website. In June 2008, *Surfing Magazine* described *Sea Fever* as "the definitive Irish surf flick" (Sea Fever n.d), and the film was screened in 2008 and 2009 at markedly different types of mainstream and surf film festivals, such as the Mid Ulster Film Festival (Omagh, Northern Ireland), the Outer Banks Surf Film Festival (North Carolina, USA), the Wavescapes Surf Film Festival (Durban, South Africa), and the

Chicago Film Festival, before winning an award for best cinematography at the Moscow Film Festival. The film was also screened at the Glór Theatre in Ennis in September 2008 (ibid).

Described by the director as "filmed over the course of two years to capture the mood of Irish surfing throughout the seasons", *Sea Fever* provides an insight to the lives of the people living the surfing life in west Clare, and it is the most illuminating film about Irish surf culture of the early 2000s. The film features interviews with some of the key subcultural figures in Irish surfing during the early 2000s, such as Clare surfers Saul Harvey and John McCarthy, English surfer Sam Lamiroy and Cornish surfer, photographer and filmmaker Mickey Smith, the rising star Easkey Britton, alongside older figures such as Rod Bennett and Kevin Cavey. Like Naomi Britton, O'Sullivan had one foot in the subculture, whilst maintaining the role of an observant documentarian.

Sea Fever represented a growth in the generic themes of Irish surf films because O'Sullivan is as curious about the environment, local communities and coastal spaces as he is about surfing; this can be seen in shots of local wildlife on the west coast. O'Sullivan has a personal interest in the natural world and his camera is drawn in *Sea Fever* to cormorants, herons, seals, crabs, jellyfish, and images of raging seas and natural forces. He also includes underwater camera photography of Dolphins and sand eels, allowing his films to project an element of wonder in nature and the connection that surfers can have with the natural world. O'Sullivan clearly regards surfing as an immersive cultural activity which is a contemporary part of the Irish coastal landscapes and culture. The result is that *Sea Fever* is an insightful snapshot of coastal life in West Clare between 2005 and 2007.

Sea Fever's meandering narrative focus recounts some of the same historical detail of Irish surfing as *The Silver Surfari*, again offering Cavey's story as the first Irish surfer,

before retelling the story of the Brittons and their deep association with Rossnowlagh, and the events of Eurosurf '72. This retelling of stories is an inherent part of the mythos and folk of surf culture and a common trait in surf cinema. The film then shifts its focus to the then recently discovered big wave at Aileens, which occupies the rest of the film's narrative. O'Sullivan allows his documentary to be guided by interviews with key subcultural figures such as John McCarthy and Mickey Smith. Because of its overall proximity to the key events and characters, *Sea Fever* captures and documents this big wave culture as it is burst into existence. O'Sullivan captures this zeitgeist without romanticism or ego. Because the director had no economic imperatives driven by production funding, his film is able to spend time interviewing and including non-professional surfers such as Saul Harvey, who helped to pioneer the surfing of waves like Aileens.

O'Sullivan was conscious of the changes that surfing would bring – and had already brought - to rural parts of Ireland. The director highlights both the positive and negative developmental potential for the rural regional economies. The film tells the story of John McCarthy and the success of the Lahinch surf school before featuring an interview with the South African board shaper Ian Johnson who decries the "circus" that his local surf break has become, and the crowd pressure that has had an eventually detrimental effect on previously empty natural spaces. The film then moves to Porthleven in Cornwall for a prescient interview with Steve England, editor of the popular British surfing magazine, *Carve*. England discusses the nature of consumer driven surf culture and its now essential importance per annum to the economy of the English south west (£200 million a year, in 2007), pointing out that surfers themselves become entrepreneurial in order to make money to sustain their lifestyle (the semi amateur films of Anthony Butler are examples of this). *Sea Fever* predicted the same commercialisation of surfing that occurred

in Cornwall to happen in Ireland over the following ten to 15 years. O'Sullivan is acutely aware of the trade-off for this growth in popularity and he inserts an interview with older surfer Mike Wingfield opining the now crowded nature of the line-ups.

Sea Fever's final 10 minutes returns to the visual spectacle of big wave surfing at Aileens. This sequence begins in exactly the same way as *Eye of the Storm* and *Waveriders,* with RTE weather reports about a coming storm and footage of surfers during a massive session at Aileens, excitingly set to the track "Brewing up a Storm" by Irish band The Stunning. Like Conroy, O'Sullivan indigenises the form with a soundtrack of relatively contemporary Irish rock and alternative folk music by artists such as Simon O'Reilly, Luka Bloom, The Stunning and Gilded Lilly. Highlighting the often-intentional, often unintentional crossover of ideas – and sometimes deliberate poaching - present in the surf films of this era, the soft folk instrumental track "Late in the Day" by Lahinch based artist Simon O'Reilly which brings *Sea Fever* to a close is also used in *Waveriders,* which was released less than a year later. In yet more collaborative crossovers, O'Reilly also had music on Mickey Smiths short *Dark Side of the Lens,* and Smith is also credited as a water cameraman on *Sea Fever*.

Although *Sea Fever* had no operating budget, O'Sullivan has since built a career as a coastal and underwater filmmaker with his collaborator at Sea Fever Productions, Katrina Costello. This highlights how creative leisure has created labour in mainstream media industries for some surf filmmakers (this concept is expanded upon in chapter 6). For example, O'Sullivan and Costello have since made the six-part documentary series *Farraige Na hEireann* (2011) for TG4, the 4-part natural history series *Ireland's Ocean* (2014) which focused on the lives of Dolphins, Sharks and Stingrays, and the two-part special *Ireland's Deep Atlantic* (2018), which was screened on RTE 1 and the European public service channel, ARTE. *Ireland's Deep Atlantic* was one of the first films to employ

the RED Epic 5k water camera and these films are now part of the secondary school curriculum in the Republic of Ireland. O'Sullivan was also the cinematographer on *The Silver Branch* (2018) and an underwater cameraman on the recent Irish horror film *Sea Fever* (2019), which references his own film in its title. He produced his second surf film in 2016 with the short film *Reflections Of An Underwater Cameraman;* a visually stunning exploration of his own work, again encompassing imagery of surfing alongside that of the natural world. This short film was released online and can be considered as part of the short Irish surf film genre which became popular after 2010.

Figure 20: A screenshot from Ken O'Sullivan's Reflections of an Underwater Cameraman (2016)

4.6 - From DVD to the Internet - Changes in Reception and Distribution.

By the end of the 2000s, the subcultural market for Irish surf films began to transition from DVD releases to online forms of exhibition. The most significant filmmaker to straddle this divide was Cornish filmmaker Mickey Smith. Smith contributed to the filming of the

20minute-long DVD release *From Shadows: Two Winters One Country* (2009), a collaborative film edited by Allan Wilson and produced by the Astray Collective. Both men would go on to work on Smiths era defining *Dark Side of the Lens*, released on the Vimeo platform in 2010. *From Shadows* was produced by Astray Films and partially sponsored by the Relentless energy drink, and distributed on the Magic Seaweed Website. This is the most professionally produced subcultural film of the period, shot in both black and white and colour, with extremely high-quality water photography and editing techniques. Like the subcultural films of Mr. B Productions, *From Shadows* features an alternative rock soundtrack and eschews narration. The central narrative drive in this film comes from acts of surfing and the voyages of discovery that the film represented.

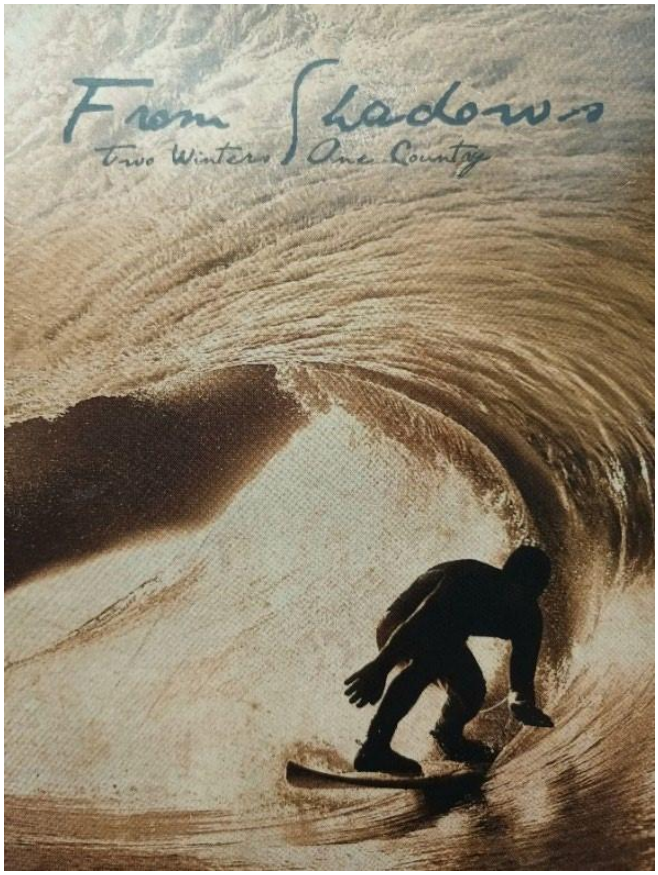

Figure 21: A film poster for From Shadows (2007). The film was distributed on the Magic Seaweed website..

This ‘voyage of discovery’ narrative was based around the Astray Collective, who were a mostly English group of surfers, bodyboarders, photographers and filmmakers that spent time in Ireland during the early 2000s, helping to pioneer two highly significant waves in Irish surf culture (Aileens, at the bottom of the cliffs of Moher, in County Clare, and Rileys, also near the same cliffs). *From Shadows* contained the same kind of exotic imagery of Ireland that became a consistent form of iconography in Irish surf films over the following decade. The iconography of sublime awe that surrounds the cliffs of Moher in *From Shadows* arguably stems from a pre-existing tourist gaze (Urry 2011) which had projected onto what had already been a major tourist attraction and a space for sublime art since the 19th century. This romantic ‘discovery’ is reimagined by the Astray collective as a reverie to the newly ‘discovered’ waves at the bottom of the cliffs. It is an example of how the construction of Ireland’s surfing heritage stems from a similar form of heritage construction described by David Brett (1996). Brett argued that romantic British leisure tourism in the 19th century was partially responsible for the creation of an Ireland’s understanding of its own visual heritage, and this is also true in the culture of Irish surf films. In the case of *From Shadows* – and other surf films – the cliffs of Moher are specifically reimagined as an active space for leisure tourism. Surfers such as Tom Lowe, Tom Gillespie John McCarthy, Cain Kilcullen, and Fergal Smith all gained subcultural exposure in the film. This exposure provides multiple forms of capital to its stars, offering social and cultural capital within the subculture, and potentially opening doors to economic capital which provides the means to continue the surfing lifestyle. Technically, the film is also of note. *From Shadows* marks the first use of GoPro or POV based cinematography in an Irish surf film.

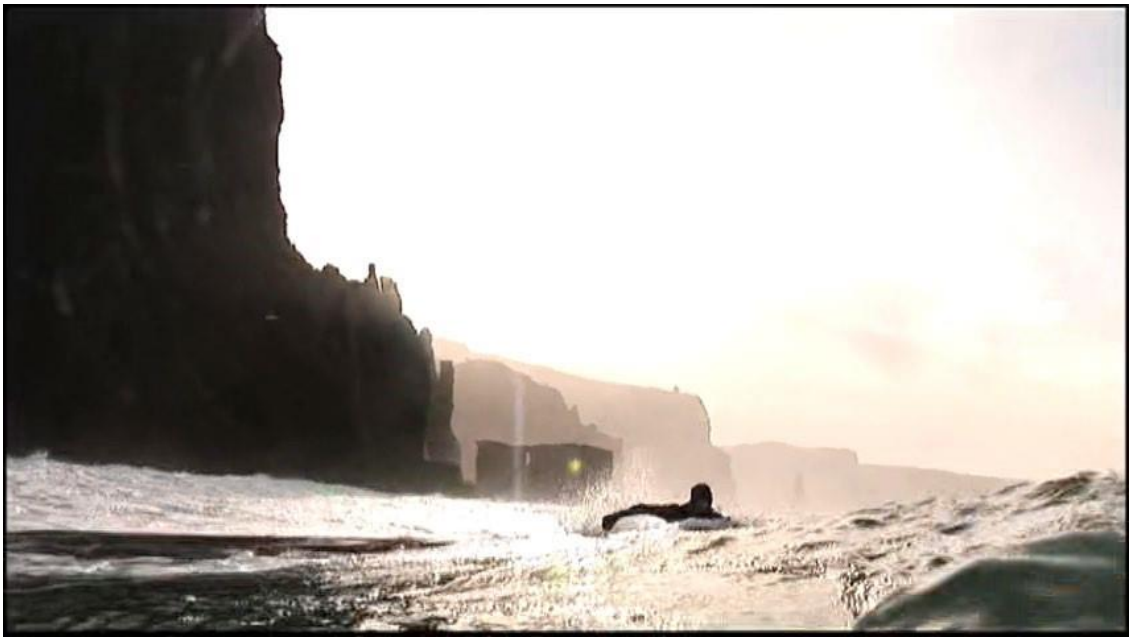

Figure 22: Sublime imagery in From Shadows. The Cliffs of Moher are aesthetically revered and mythologised in the genre of short Irish surf films.

By the end of the 2000s, changes in production and distribution methods were evident in the release of Ross Cairn's 34-minute-long documentary, *Powers of Three* (2009), a film that again articulated the dangers of surfing at Aileens and Rileys. *Powers of Three* was released online on the Relentless energy drink website and it was one of the first subcultural Irish surf films to have a professional film and post production crew. Cairn's film describes the close relationship between tow surfing partners Fergal Smith and Tome Lowe, and their collaborator and photographer Mickey Smith. The film emphasised the harshness of the Irish coastline and winter weather in its visual signifiers and this iconography became a distinct generic characteristic in Irish surf films over the next decade.

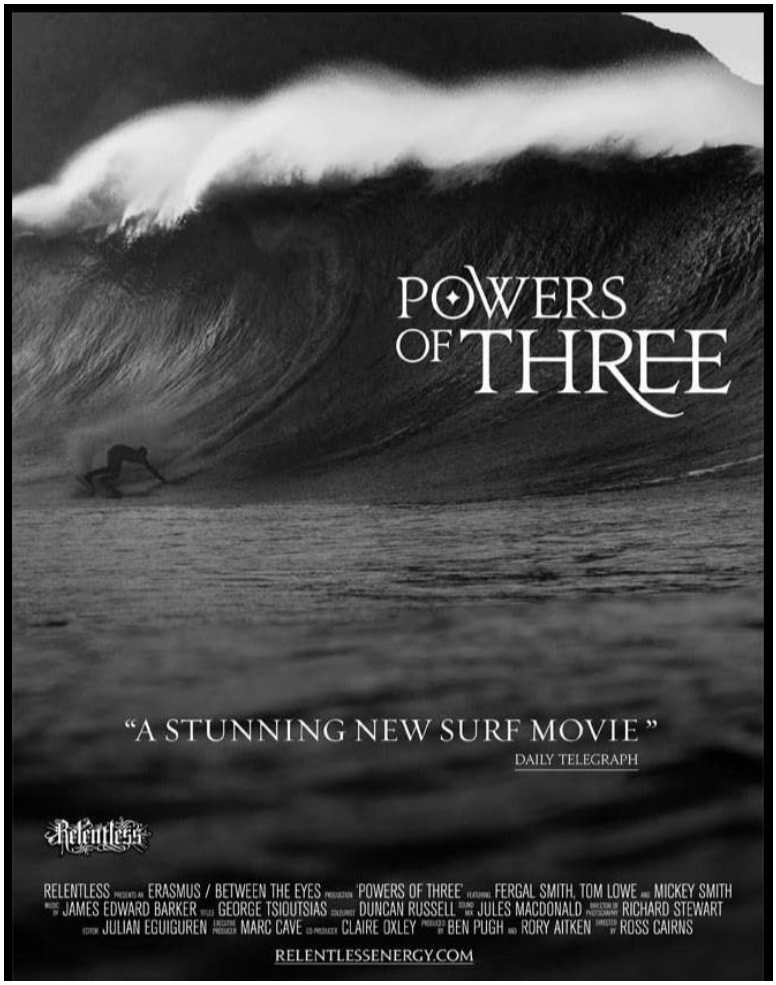

Figure 23: Powers of Three poster which displays the mimesis of mainstream film posters.

The most significant indigenous Irish surf film of this decade was *Waking Maeve* (2010), which marked a turning point in the distribution of Irish surf films.[26] *Waking Maeve* is a highly innovative youth driven 29-minute-long subcultural surf film emerging from the environs around Strandhill in County Sligo, with a focus on local surfers. The film was produced by Osaka born Japanese surfer Yujishimobay under the name of Tropical Motions Productions. Highlighting the collaborative nature of the developing genre, *Waking Maeve* was shot by Stephen Kilfeather, Peter Clyne (who filmed numerous

[26] Only two other subcultural Irish surf films were released on DVD in the following decade. These were *No Boarders* and *Children of the Norn*, both produced by Meldrew Productions and sold through their website and the Troggs surf shop in Portrush.
30 I bought this film from the Bundoran Surf Company, in Bundoran, County Donegal, in 2010.

online surf edits over the next decade), and Yujishimobay (who has also released short Irish surf films, such as *Moment Bye Moment*, released on the Vimeo streaming platform in 2018). The film was released on DVD and sold in local surf shops in the Sligo and Donegal region[30]. The film was sponsored by a variety of small local businesses such as the Strandhill Surf School and Waxon Surfboards (a local independent surfboard maker). It is therefore representative of the same financial relationships that Douglas Booth describes of the political economy of surfing industries (2017), but on a far smaller scale, and with very little economic capital invested or gained.

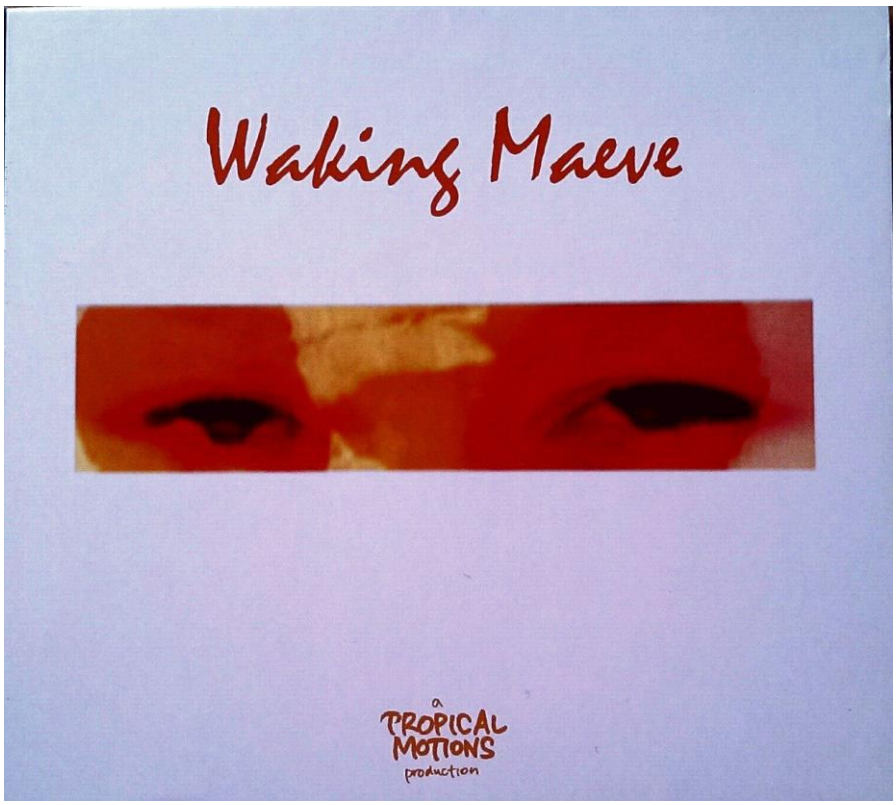

Figure 24: Waking Maeve DVD release. The film was only available to buy in Irish surf shops.

The film begins with an innovative introduction in which three skateboarders skate to the waveless summertime Strandhill seafront, which overlaps with an archive image of

the seafront from the early 20th century. This breaks into a boisterous title sequence with large graphics stating “STRABOYZ and STRAGIRLZ NEVER PULL OUT” which streams across the screen in large text. The style is reminiscent of 1990s surfing and music videos; Taylor Steele surf films are also a notable influence. The film is set across four sections, each named after the four seasons. *Waking Maeve* retained the basic structure of the global subcultural surf film – surfing set to music and hijinks – but localises it. *Waking Maeve* additionally introduced the iconography of Irish mythology for the first time in an Irish surf film. The titular Maeve refers to a mythological queen of Connacht from the Ulster cycle of Irish mythology, whose name can be found in a variety of places in Sligo, and was supposedly buried at Miosgán Meadhbha (Maeve’s Cairn) in Knocknarea, County Sligo. *Waking Maeve* was representative of the indigenisation of a global form by a collaborative and youth-based regional community filmmaking group. This became the most common form of production of Irish surf films after 2010. Over the following decade, subcultural Irish surf films increased in number and predominantly became distributed on video hosting platforms, which provided a low-cost global means of exhibition and distribution.

4.7 - Conclusion – The Emergence of an Autonomous Genre

This chapter analysed the emergence of Irish surf films, tracing their development from the early 2000s through the rise of online distribution. It showed how these films initially circulated in diverse forms and markets, reflecting varied production practices and audience engagements. The chapter also examined the growth of an independent political economy in Irish surf film culture, where films were distributed through non-traditional channels such as surf shops and small-scale local screenings. These developments provide essential context for the differing economic models of production discussed in chapters six and seven.

It is interesting to note that public finance played a key role in the production of *Eye* of *the Storm* and *The Silver Surfari*, because both films represent some of the first Irish surf films ever produced.[27] But films such as *Driven*, *Sea Fever*, *From Shadows*, and *Waking Maeve* most clearly represent the emergent community based subcultural filmmaking that coalesced into the online short Irish surf film genre after 2010. Each film was distributed locally on DVD through community surf shops. Each film was produced by what can be described as craft based amateur and semi-amateur filmmakers. Each film is representative of a subcultural form in which labour cannot be separated from leisure, which will be explored further in chapter six. Each film displays a high level of creative freedom provided by their low to no budget subcultural economies. This creative agency is reflected in their eclectic aesthetics and forms. By the late 2000s, Irish surf filmmaking had begun to mimic the autonomous systems of production, distribution, and exhibition which characterised the vertically integrated economies of surf cinema in the USA and Australia. Many of the icons that would become recognisable elements of the genre were established in this period, such as the connection between diaspora and 'home', the recounting of the

[27] The only other country to offer as much public support for surf filmmaking is Australia.

activity's history, winter-based imagery, and hard primitivist romantic depictions of the Irish coastline

The subcultural films described in this chapter are problematic for Murdock and Golding and Mosco's interpretations of how theoretical political economy of media should be utilised. They cannot be understood as the dominant products of private forms of media, nor are they representative of media with a clear relationship with public forms of finance.[28] As the conclusion to this work will show, this highlights Paul Dwyer's critique of political economy which argues that the theory must focus on the actual lived realties of specific production cultures. Dwyer contends that as a result of generalisation, the political economy of media fails to provide a coherent theory of media production. He suggests an alternative paradigm which he describes as the "the theory of craft media production". This form of craft production is reflective of the kinds of participatory community-based production cultures which produce films such as *Waking Maeve*. The reality of much of the labour put into the production of these films is that it is not labour in the sense of the acquisition of financial reward, but rather a creative cultural practice based in leisure and lifestyle.

[28] *Eye of the Storm* and *The Silver Surfari* excepted.

Chapter 5*:* Surf Films as National Cinema? National sources of funding in *Waveriders* (Joel Conroy 2008) and *Between Land and Sea* (Ross Whitaker 2017)

This chapter focuses on the funding and distribution models of two surf films whose status as publicly funded productions places them within the framework of an Irish national cinema. It argues that, despite this classification, these films are not reflective of the dominant economic models typically associated with Irish surf film production. Through close analysis of both texts, the chapter highlights their capacity to operate outside the subcultural and independent modes explored in earlier chapters, revealing how publicly funded productions engage with surf culture in Ireland.

5.1 - Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the political economy of two feature length Irish surf films that were partially financed through significant amounts of public funding; Joel Conroy's *Waveriders* and Ross Whitaker's *Between Land and Sea* (2017). Both films are exceptional in that their modes of production, exhibition and distribution are unrepresentative of the vast majority of subcultural Irish surf films produced since 2002. They are also the only Irish surf films to have been released in both national and international cinemas. Neither fits the category of the "pure" surf film, described by Booth and Ormrod, but both are potentially the only examples of surf films as Irish 'national' cinema, as defined by Barton (2004, 3-12). Barton employs O'Regan's definition to show how national cinemas are "made of the films and film production industry of particular nations. National cinemas involve relations between…national film texts and the national film industries and…their various social, political and cultural contexts" (1996). Unlike most surf films in this study, *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea* fit this definition because in that they were produced utilsing public funds that were specifically provided to promote national ideas of Irish culture and were then screened in Irish cinemas (although

Between Land and Sea had a limited release). In the case of *Waveriders*, this funding was to arguably promote a post-national sense of identity and culture.

When *Waveriders* was released in Irish cinemas in 2008 it was regarded as something of a cinematic oddity. At the time, Conroy's film was the first and only feature length Irish surf film. In an interview with Conroy in *The Irish Times*, Donald Clarke highlighted an element of the unknown about the film, and of Irish surf culture, writing that "I assumed that Irish surfers – all seven of them – spent their unhappy afternoons getting steadily more frostbitten in the sort of swells that would struggle to upend a discarded toothpaste cap" (2009). But although *Waveriders* captured the imagination of Irish critics, it was by no means the first example of the Irish surf film genre.

This chapter will show that both *Waveriders*' and Whitaker's feature length documentary *Between Land and Sea* represented a recycling of ideas that had appeared in prior Irish surf films, and in examples of the genre that featured Ireland as a location. Far from being a cinematic outlier, by 2008, *Waveriders* represented just one of the many examples of the Irish surf film genre. This film built on Conroy's *Eye of the Storm*, which was produced in 2002 (described in the previous chapter). *Waveriders* would come to dominate popular understandings of Irish surf films and Irish surfing, but many of its narrative elements had already occurred in prior surf films, such as *Thicker than Water*, *The Far Shore*, *Step into Liquid*, and *Eye of the Storm*. Ross Whitaker's *Between Land and Sea* was equally influenced by Ken O'Sullivan's *Sea Fever* and particularly by the short online Irish surf film genre which had developed since 2010. The production of *Between Land and Sea* was enabled by this unique subcultural political economy because a key Irish surf filmmaker, Kev L. Smith, provided much of the visual aesthetic of the film in water, drone and landscape cinematography.

5.2 - *Waveriders*, The Good Friday Agreement, and a (Post?) National Irish Surf Film?

The most well-known Irish surf film produced during the 2000s is *Waveriders*, directed by Joel Conroy and produced by Margo Harkin. The title of *Waveriders* comes from Hawaiian word for surfer, *he'e nalu*, which translates directly as 'wave-rider', or 'surf-rider'. This film was released in Irish and UK cinemas in 2008 and would go on to have a limited international release in the United States and Australia. *Waveriders* was based in the relationships that its director had built within the surfing subculture but deliberately aimed its popular appeal at a large international audience. It is the most widely known and successful Irish surf film, and the most accessible to audiences with no prior knowledge of surfing. In this sense, it is part of a lineage of surf films with subcultural elements that have achieved mainstream cinematic success over the last 50 years, such as *The Endless Summer*, *Five Summer Stories*, and in particular Stacy Peralta's *Riding Giants* (2004) and Dana Brown's *Step into Liquid* (2002). As a result of its methods of funding and distribution, Conroy's film is unquestionably part of the political economy of mainstream Irish cinema and the international genre of the surf film, rather than the generic economy of subcultural Irish surf films. *Waveriders* was funded through the EU Interreg IIIA programme which resulted in the production and release of two separate versions of the film; one edited for Irish and international audiences, and another for Northern Irish audiences[29]. This begs the question as to whether or not *Waveriders* can be considered part of an Irish national cinema, whether it is a Northern Irish film, or whether its cross border regional funding deliberately attempts to mould the film as a postnationalist text.

[29] The EU Interreg IIIA programme was a cross border initiative (2000-2006) aimed at fostering economic and social integration between regions of the European Union.

Although *Waveriders* appeared to critics as if from nowhere, the film included a repertoire of generic elements that had already been seen in previous Irish surf films. Most obviously, the film very much resembles an expanded version of *Eye of the Storm*, made by Conroy 6 years previously, and the winner of the Stranger than Fiction documentary festival award for best documentary in 2002. *Waveriders* was a co-production between the experienced Derry filmmaker and producer Margo Harkin's Besom Productions and Conroy's Inís Films. Harkin was most well-known for the 1989 film *Hush A Bye Baby* – the story of a young Catholic girl who falls pregnant during the troubles. *Waveriders* was Conroy's first feature length documentary. After filming *Eye of the Storm* in 2002, the director had been involved in the production of the MTV reality series *Meet the Barkers* (2004), before working with Harkin on the production of the 2006 television film *The Hunger Strike*. When asked in 2009 in an interview with Roisin Cronin why he made *Waveriders*, Conroy responded:

> I'm a surfer myself and have been surfing since a very early stage in my life. I've always been in and around the ocean and seen the development of the sport in Ireland so by combining that with my film making background it was a very enticing and attractive thing for me to do (Cronin 2009).

Waveriders is credited as being written by Conroy and screenwriter Lauren Davies, who also appeared in *Eye of the Storm* (Lauren and Gabe Davies are married). The film took almost 2 years to shoot, primarily due to the time taken between swells that had good enough weather conditions to allow for both surfing and filming to occur on the same day. The international release of the film was narrated by the now Oscar winning Cillian Murphy (already an established star by 2009). *Waveriders* features some of the best filmed images of Irish surfing. The film had its world premiere on the 22nd of February 2008 at 8.30pm at Jameson Dublin International Film Festival, Cineworld, Parnell St. Dublin. It

was also screened at the Galway Film Fleadh on the 11th of July 2008. Its Northern Irish and UK premiere was on the 19th April 2008 at the 8th Jameson Belfast Film Festival, before its US debut on the 28th of January 2009 at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. It had its full Irish cinematic release on the 3rd of April 2009. The film then had an Australian premiere at the St Kilda Open-Air Cinema in February 2010. It was distributed in cinemas and on DVD by Element Pictures, and has since been screened on a variety of streaming platforms.

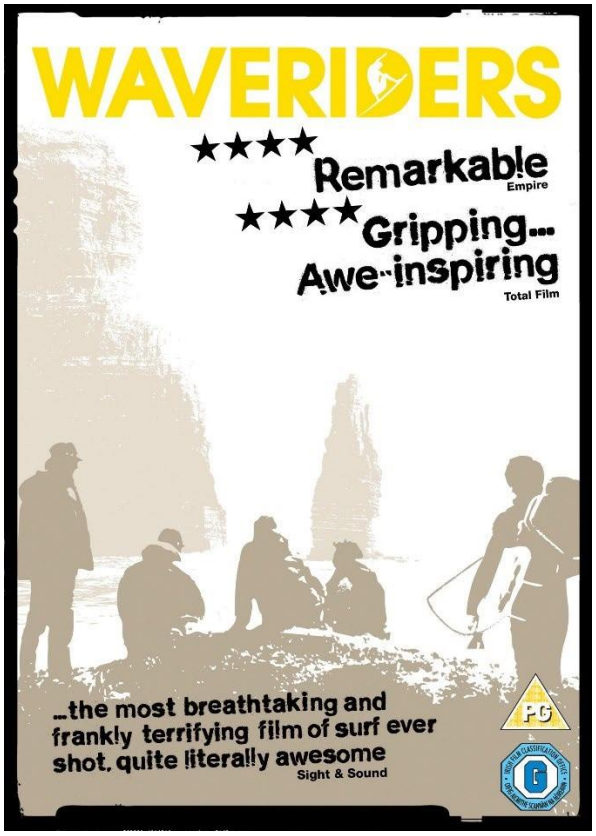

Figure 25: The UK and Irish DVD release of Waveriders.

Apart from its focus on travel, discovery, and big wave surfing, one of the reasons that *Waveriders* bears aesthetic resemblance to cinematic predecessors such as *The Endless Summer* and *Riding Giants* is that it is the only Irish surf film ever to be shot on 35mm

film, which provides the film with an intrinsically cinematic feel. Conroy explained his choice of shooting on film rather than a digital format:

> We made a decision not to shoot digital and to shoot film for two primary reasons. One was the light in Ireland. Film is much better at capturing definition especially in water. When it's overcast, the overcast sky reflects of the ocean. You have no horizon line and it basically goes into a bleached-out mass, but film shows the definition there and the reflections on the water just works magic. The second reason was to shoot slow motion high speed because if you look at surfing with the naked eye from the shore, it doesn't look like anything. If you take the camera into the wave and slow it down for the human eye you get to see the beautiful ballet poetry on the wave. We used these Photo sonic 1VN cameras which were used in the 80s by American and British military to film the reaction of G force on pilots in mid-flight, so they were very compact cameras. We got a couple of those customised and broke the gates on them to make them Super 16. We also used Bolexes and an Acon A mm. There was a whole variety of cameras for different stages. When we were shooting the Cliffs of Moher scene there were five cameras running simultaneously; one on the back of the jet ski, one in the boat and three on the cliffs (ibid).

Conroy also chose a soundtrack mixed with well-known Irish artists such as U2 and the Undertones, and local artists such as Simon O'Reilly (whose music was also used in *Sea Fever*). In a positive review of the film Peter Bradshaw noted that "director Joel Conroy has had the inspired idea of using the Undertones' Teenage Kicks as backing music to some awe inspiring big-wave action" (Bradshaw 2010).

The film begins with aerial photography of the Northwest region around Sligo and Bundoran, accompanied by on-screen quotations by Oscar Wilde and WB Yeats (another attempt to indigenise the form by grounding the film in Irish culture and aesthetics). The films eclectic narrative is based around the same Richie Fitzgerald/Gabe Davies axis as Conroy's previous film *Eye of the Storm*, with the two friends again explaining their hunt for big waves on the West coast of Ireland. *Waveriders* cemented Fitzgerald's position as a star of Irish surf films, and audiences are again provided with a background to Fitzgerald and Davies friendship, and in particular Fitzgerald's journey to becoming a Bundoran

based professional surfer and surf shop owner, from the use of woolly jumpers and marigold gloves to keep warm in winter to his globetrotting surf competition days. The film then switches to Portrush on the North Coast for a brief interview with 6-time Irish surfing champion Andrew Hill. Rather than retreading the history of Irish surfing, the film then included two Irish-American narratives in the now well-trodden Kevin Naughton story (seen in *The Far Shore, The Silver Surfari,* and *Keep it a Secret*), in which he articulates the mythical status of Ireland as a surf destination in the 1970s. This sequence, aptly accompanied by John Martyn's 1973 song "Over the Hill", stresses the importance of travel and discovery in surf culture and features period film and photography by Craig Peterson from Ireland in the early 1970s.

This is followed by another appearance from Chris Malloy, who had already appeared in the American films *Thicker Than Water* and *Step Into Liquid* (discussed in the previous chapter). Conroy offers a portrait of Malloy and his brothers Keith and Dan as they take on big surf at Aileens (part of the same session recorded in Ken O'Sullivan's *Sea Fever*). The Malloys are a well-known family of Californian born Irish-American surfing brothers who maintained their lifestyle by becoming professional soul surfers (a problematic dichotomy in itself). This rehashes the Irish sequence of Dana Brown's *Step Into Liquid* in which the brothers describe their ancestry and the importance of their heritage. Both sequences are punctuated by the now generic theme of the Irish-American 'narrative of return'. This trope of the emigrant fantasy of return is strongly associated with the Irish-American diaspora and can be regularly observed in early and silent American cinema in the early 20th century. Films produced by the Kalem Company and directed by Sidney Olcott, such as *The Lad from Old Ireland* (1910), sought to emotively engage Irish-American audiences based on this premise.

The most iconic example of this representational device takes place in John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952), in which Sean Thornton returns to claim his ancestral home in the fictional town of Inisfree (Barton 2004, 71-76; Gibbons 2002). This trope is also present in *Waveriders*, as the brothers articulate their Irish heritage and the story of their grandmother's emigration. In one post-surf moment whilst wistfully staring out to sea, Chris Malloy says:

> You don't come to Ireland just because you wanna be a soldier of fortune and score big waves…you go to Ireland because you wanna be in Ireland. There's that relationship that humans have had here in Ireland for hundreds and thousands of years where the rocks and the ocean collide. You either hear that calling, or you don't (Waveriders 2008).

Waveriders is almost totally masculine in its representation of Irish surfing, but the film does feature Easkey Britton in a scene in which she becomes the first woman to surf at Aileens. The film also pulled off a major coup in the presence of Kelly Slater, the biggest surfing star of all-time, surfing at Easkey in Sligo. Slater is an 11-time world champion of the sport and one of the few surfers to have achieved success in mainstream popular culture as a model, and having appeared in the American TV series *Baywatch* in the 1990s. *Waveriders* culminates in the same way as *Eye of the Storm*, with a genuinely thrilling finale featuring Fitzgerald and Davies taking on massive storm waves at Mullaghmore, in County Sligo.

The main narrative thrust is the films focus on the historical figure of George Freeth, who is regarded as the first white person to have taken up the Hawaiian activity of surfing. The importance of Freeth to the film's economy was that it provided an opening to a potentially wider American audience. Conroy describes that:

> It wasn't really until I read about this character George Freeth who re-invented surfing in Hawaii, and then introduced it to California, that I realised there was the potential for a strong narrative sub plot story. By using him as the historical element in blending the contemporary characters spread over three or four generations, that was really when the whole project came together for me (Cronin 2009).

The renowned waterman George Freeth was born in 1883 in Honolulu to an Irish sea captain and a part-Hawaiian woman (Warshaw 2005). Doc Ball's 1946 book *California Surfriders* described Freeth as the "Mainland's first Surfboarder", and credits him as the first person to bring back the "lost art" of standing on a surfboard whilst catching a wave, at Waikiki in 1900 (Ball 1946). Freeth was seen surfing at Waikiki beach by the American railroad magnate Henry E. Huntington in 1907 and taken to California, where Huntington was involved in the major development at Redondo beach. Huntington's intention was to use Freeth and the relatively new American activity of surfing to popularise the location with prospective home buyers. Freeth is credited as a significant figure in United States lifeguarding and in the innovation of surf rescue equipment, having invented the "rescue can" (a buoy used by lifeguards). *Waveriders* documents Freeth's life through interviews with experts in the history of surf culture, and through innovative use of coloured storyboards which visually recreate Freeth for the audience. Conroy intended for these sequences to be animated, but the films budget didn't allow for this. The storyboard sequences are responsible for the two most emotive sequences in the film. The first focuses on one of Freeth's acts of bravery (described in period newspapers) imagining him as an almost herculean figure as he risks his life to save seven Japanese fishermen during a storm; an act for which he was decorated with a Gold Lifesaving Medal by the US Coast Guard. The second storyboard sequence depicts Freeth's death in 1919 at the age of 35 as a result of the Spanish flu virus, imagining him as the ultimate soul surfer paddling into an orange sunset. Some claims in the film regarding Freeth must be questioned however, such

as Hawaiian surfer Rabbit Kekai's account of meeting Freeth at Waikiki. Freeth died in 1919, and Kekai was born in 1920, so this seems highly unlikely. Regardless of this, and because of Freeth's narrative (and to a lesser extent the Malloy's), the film becomes a story of Irish emigration which ties the ancient Hawaiian activity of surfing into historical tropes about the Island of Ireland, and the almost mythical achievements and influence of the Irish diaspora in American popular culture.

In a review of *Waveriders* for *Hot Press* in 2009, Tara Brady wrote:

> Lecture no. 46. For those of you who haven't being paying attention, all the best Irish movies are documentaries. Our feature films may be plagued by script problems and budgetary constraints, but our flies on the wall are thriving. Sadly, to date, nothing can be done to persuade the masses to shell out for documentary titles. Just look at *Saviours*, Ross Whitaker and Liam Nolan's remarkable boxing doc. The film boasted a killer Olympic angle and some of the best reviews of last year. Did anybody go? Did they hell (Brady 2009).

Reflecting Brady's point, *Waveriders* grossed a meagre €24, 323 at the Irish box office on its opening weekend in early April 2009 making it the tenth highest grossing film in Ireland that weekend (IFTN 2009). The film made £38, 083 in the United Kingdom on the same weekend, and its overall global gross of $142, 878 was far less than it cost to produce the film (Box Office Mojo n.d.). This was despite the fact that the critical reaction and audience reception to *Waveriders* on its release was hugely positive. Donald Clarke lauded the film at the Dublin International Film Festival (DIFF) 2009, writing that:

> The best Irish documentary on show was…Joel Conroy's cracking *Waveriders*. The surfing doc is now a genre in itself, and Conroy's overpowering picture deserves to take its place alongside earlier classics such as *Riding Giants* and *The Endless Summer*. *Waveriders* was a deserved winner of the festival's audience award (Besom Productions n.d.).

Waveriders won the audience award at the Dublin International Film Festival in 2009 and the George Morrison award for best documentary at the 2009 Irish Film and Television Awards (IFTAs). It then won best documentary at the Beloit Film Festival 2009 (Wisconsin, USA), best sports documentary at Celtic Media Festival in Caernarvon 2009, Outstanding Achievement in Sports Filmmaking at Newport Beach film festival 2009 (California), and best film at the Surfer magazine poll awards in 2009. Again referencing Stacy Peralta's big wave surfing documentary, Channel 4 films described the film as "the first essential surfing movie since *Riding Giants*" (Irish Film Board Production catalogue 2010). The film struck a chord with American audiences in particular, and when screened at the 2008 Santa Barbara International Film Festival, Conroy noted that:

> There was an amazing reaction to it. It sold out in hours of going on sale and we ended up putting it on for another three screenings and they all sold out as well. The first screening was in a two and a half thousand-seater auditorium and it was just mind blowing to have such a reaction (Cronin 2009).

Not all critics fell for *Waveriders*' charms. In an annual review of Irish sports documentaries for *Estudio Irlandeses*, Harvey O'Brien described the images of surfing in the film as "generic", and stated that "there is a sense that the pitch of a film about surfing in Ireland and the legacy of Irish surfers is ultimately more exciting than the product, as least insofar as it contributes something fresh to both Irish documentary and Irish sport" (O'Brien 2010). Reviewing the film for the UK Independent newspaper in 2009, Anthony Quinn, who enjoyed the film as a spectacle, wittily described that…

> however much you admire the daring of these young surfers, you soon realise that listening to them yarn on about the sport can become very, very boring. 'It's, like, bigger than a dream,' says one individual, a phrase that doesn't really communicate anything about surfing, or, indeed, about dreams (Quinn 2009).

Fitzgerald and Davies would go on to do a week-long promotional tour of Ireland for the film, culminating with an appearance with Ryan Tubridy on Ireland's most well-known television talk show, *The Late Late Show*.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of the political economy of *Waveriders* was that it was funded through part-financing of €250,000 by the European Union through the INTERREG IIIA Programme managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by the ICBAN (Irish Central Border Area Network) Partnership (Besom Productions n.d.). The film also received funding by Northern Irish Screen, the Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann (€50,000), the BBC, and the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland.[30] The INTERREG IIIA was a "EU Community Initiative designed to support cross border cooperation, social cohesion and economic development between regions of the EU", which ran from 2000 to 2006. This regional initiative "recognised the relatively disadvantaged situation of Border Regions throughout the European Community and proposed a mechanism of support for such areas" (Special EU Programmes Body n.d). The eligible area for the INTERREG IIIA Programme was Northern Ireland and the six border counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo (ibid).

It is interesting to note that a surf film was provided with funding from this initiative, which focused on three main priorities:

1) Integrated local development strategies: enhancing the capacity at local level for the development and implementation of local development strategies that would focus on promoting economic and social cohesion.
2) Supporting physical infrastructure and the environment: improving the physical environment and spatial cohesion of the eligible area.

[30] This information provided on request by Screen Ireland. 35 The Good Friday Agreement is a historically important peace accord aimed at resolving the conflict known as 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. It also aimed to promote cooperation between Ireland, Britain, and Northern Ireland.

3) Civic and community networking: Promoting actions which improve the quality of life of the population of the eligible area and which are inclusive and participative in nature and operation (ibid).

Clearly the filmed depiction of surfing and its role in the development of regional border communities in places such as Bundoran and Portrush constituted such priorities for the INTERREG IIA programme. The managing authority for the INTERREG IIIA Programme was the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) which was one of six North/South Implementation Bodies established under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement (ibid).[35] *Waveriders* was deliberately regional, national, and postnational in its aims because the film was representative of a method of funding that emerged in Ireland following the Good Friday Agreement, but also representative of a European policy aimed at promoting regional identities. Similar to the discourse in the Northern Irish subcultural surf film *No Boarders* (2014), *Waveriders* imagines Ireland as an apolitical Island which is inclusive of surfers from Donegal (the Republic of Ireland), Antrim (Northern Ireland), England, and America. This cross-border theme was embodied in the financial structures that allowed *Waveriders* to be produced in the first place. These structures align with the goals that Richard Kearney articulated in 1997 when arguing that a future Ireland and emerging Europe must "allow for multiple layers of compatible identification—regional, national and federal" (1997, 152). This includes the notion that "every nation is a hybrid construct, an 'imagined' community which can be reimagined again in alternative versions" (ibid). *Waveriders* engages in such 'reimagining' to depict surfing as a postnational activity that aligned with the INTERREG IIA programme's reasons for financing for the film, which aimed to create cross border relationships that went beyond 'national' ideologies.

The irony of this mode of funding is that two distinct national versions of *Waveriders* exist; a film that was prepared for Irish and international cinema release, and a specifically Northern Irish version produced for BBC Northern Ireland, which was a

condition of its co-financing by the broadcaster. This was screened on BBC Northern Ireland on the 10th of May 2010. The differences between the two versions are considerable. For example, the BBC Northern Ireland version of the film is 59 minutes long, whereas the main release was 78 minutes long.[31] Northern Irish actor Richard Dormer narrates the Northern Irish version, rather than Cork born Cillian Murphy. This version also places considerably more focus on Northern Irish surfer Andrew Hill and his father Ian Hill, who founded the Troggs surf shop in Portrush during the 1980s. Ian Hill was cut out of international release. The Hill's describes the early days of Irish surfing and slightly mock the idea of George Freeth, who they don't seem to know anything about (perhaps the reason why the sequence was cut from the main release). Strangely, this version of the film ignores the historical influence of the 'Belfast Crew' who would feature significantly in the later Irish surf film *Keep it a Secret*. During his interview, Ian Hill emphasises – ironically given the existence of the two versions of the films - that politics doesn't come into the act of surfing in Ireland. This version also features many more shots of surfing at Northern Irish locations.

The production of *Waveriders* operated within a completely different set of economic realities than the vast majority of Irish surf films. *Waveriders* had access to financial and technical resources that other Irish surf filmmakers in this period did not, resulting in a mainstream cinema release with a widespread marketing campaign. This presented its own difficulties. Unused to the regulatory frameworks regarding the insurance of those taking part in the filming process, Richie Fitzgerald recounted in his memoir *Cold-Water Eden* scolding a member of the *Waveriders* production staff when told he could not surf in the waves that culminated in the final scene - "As we suited up,

[31] I was generously provided with a copy of this version by the film's director, Joel Conroy.

preparing our equipment, the jet skis checked and the board strapped down, I saw the health and safety officer for *Waveriders* coming over again, looking like she was about to have a heart attack" (2022, 314). Fitzgerald later told her he would sign a waiver to participate in the epic surf (ibid).

The most obvious trait that *Waveriders* would pass to later Irish surf films was the mass popularisation of images of surfing juxtaposed with wistful imagery of Irish landscapes and coastlines. This paved a way for later Irish surf films to appear as an outright form rather than singular oddities. Conroy stated in an interview in 2013 that he didn't wish to make a film which engaged with any clichés about Ireland, and although the film does in fact connect with some old tropes regarding the diaspora and Irish emigration, it is their association with the act of surfing that provides them with something new.[32] Although previous subcultural films (described in the previous chapter) had established Ireland as an idyllic location off the beaten track, *Waveriders* was the first major indigenous production to do so. The films intention was clearly to provide Fitzgerald and Davies with a platform for their professional careers, but also to promote Ireland as a surfing destination, and to describe the joy that the activity provides to its practitioners. Some aspects of the film were difficult to swallow, such as the idea that Kevin Naughton had "returned the sport to the its unlikely origins" on his arrival in Ireland. However, some of the images of surfing in Ireland filmed by cinematographer Daniel Trapp are amongst the most accomplished ever filmed on the island. Equally, the film's final sequence remains thrilling in an era when big wave surfing at Mullaghmore is now documented annually, and instantaneously, through social media sites such as Instagram.

[32] This public interview took place after a screening of *Waveriders* in Bundoran in 2013 as part of the Transatlantic Connections conference.

***5.3 - Between Land and Sea*: Blurring Boundaries between Film and Television in the Sports Documentary**

A significant change occurred in the Irish screen media landscape in 2009 with the founding of the Broadcast Authority of Ireland (known as Coimisiún na Meán since 2023). The Broadcast Authority of Ireland (BAI) would have a major influence on film and television funding in Ireland throughout the following decade. Ross Whitakers feature length Irish surf film *Between Land and Sea* (2017) was partially financed by this authority. Whitaker's film reflected changing economic markets in the industrial landscape of Irish screen industries in its production, distribution, and exhibition. This section will show that much of *Between Land and Sea*'s apparent originality was influenced by the subcultural economy of short Irish surf edits (see chapter six). Whitakers film utilised personalities, filmmakers, locations, waves, surfers, and technologies that had already become commonplace in the production culture of the short Irish surf film.

Like all examples of the surf film genre, *Between Land and Sea* is situated in the basic generic principle of visual spectacle, but Whitaker was already an accomplished sports filmmaker in his own right, and managed to push beyond basic generic tropes. Whitaker established himself as Ireland's premier director of sports documentaries having achieved popular success with films such as the successful boxing documentary *Saviours* (2007). He would go on to offer an intimate portrait of the Irish professional boxer Katie Taylor in *Katie* (2018) and to document Ireland's first test series rugby victory over New Zealand in *Tackling the All Blacks* (2022). Whitaker was hired to shoot a surf documentary by Motive Films, who recently won a Sports Emmy for Outstanding Long Documentary for *The Deepest Breath* (Laura McCann, 2024), a Netflix documentary release about freediver Alessia Zecchini and her Irish trainer, Stephen Keenan. Whitaker follows the

rhythms of the coastal community in Lahinch across the four seasons, just as the subcultural film *Waking Maeve* had done for Strandhill in 2010. The film observes the lives of local surfers from the position of an outsider, which is one of the few times this has occurred in films about surfing in Ireland.[33]

Whitaker's documentary style is observational and based on personal explorations of his protagonists, alongside an exposition of the realities of sporting life. *Between Land and Sea* highlights the extent to which the lifestyle of surfing has become a central to the contemporary economies of Irish coastal regions. *Between Land and Sea* (full title: *Between Land and Sea: A Year in the Life of an Atlantic Surf Town*) is affectionate observational documentary filmed over the course of a year in Lahinch in County Clare. Lahinch and its environs had become holiday locations since the 19th Century before becoming a major Irish surfing location during the late 1960s. The town has since become one of Ireland's major surfing centres, alongside Bundoran and Portrush. Unlike surf filmmakers, Whitaker's interest in the surfers of the region is on land as much as their exploits in the sea. The director explores the lives of some local surfers, many of whom were already well-known figures in the Irish surfing subculture and had already appeared in short Irish subcultural surf films and magazines like *Tonnta* and *Carve*. These include Fergal Smith, Ollie O'Flaherty, and Tom Doidge-Harrison. Whitaker also profiles the lives of other local people in the town, such as sea swimmer Pat Conway and the annual Lahinch-Liscannor swim.

[33] Sean Duggan's *Keep it a Secret* is another example.

Figure 26: Korean poster for Between Land and Sea highlighting the international appeal of the film.

Between Land and Sea can be regarded as hybrid text, occupying a space between the subcultural Irish surf film and a 'national' form of sports documentary film (in that it is funded by national public sources of funding). From its opening scene – featuring ethereal slow-motion images which emphasise the power of Atlantic swells that hit the Irish west coast every winter - the film visually resembles many of the short subcultural surf films known as 'edits' made in the early 2010s. This is because *Between Land and Sea* is significantly influenced by them. Kevin Smith (Now Kev L. Smith), a surf filmmaker influenced by the work of Mickey Smith and brother of Fergal Smith, provides the film with most of its drone, water and surf photography. Clem McInerney - another

videographer and director of surf edits - is credited as providing extra footage. Mickey Smith is also credited with providing archive footage.

The director situates his film in the everyday realities of his surfer protagonists. Whitaker captures a mournful quality to Doidge-Harrison - an English big wave surfer and mining engineer who also shapes boards - capturing a recognition that aspects of his life and career will always be stunted because of time spent dedicated to surfing. Whitaker also profiles the lives of the people surrounding the surfers who are affected by their decisions, such as Doidge-Harrisons wife Raquel and daughter Nora. Fergal Smith is a former professional surfer known for the pursuit of big waves and a key figure in Irish surf culture. He has also appeared in short Irish surf films since the 2000s, such as *Powers of Three* (2009). Whitaker documents Smith's rejection of commercial surf culture and the birth of his successful organic Moyhill farm, where he is seen living in a yurt (Moyhill farm also featured in an online series of films titled *Growing*, produced by Smith and his brother Kevin in 2014 and 2015). Ollie O'Flaherty (another well-known Irish surfing professional) bluntly explains the economy of his profession, noting that pro-surfers need to create a "good media presence" and that he "wanted to take advantage of that. When the waves are good, we try and get a photographer, and try to get photos in magazines and in websites" (in order to get sponsors, who can provide money to sustain the lifestyle). O'Flaherty opines the lack of financial sustainability in his profession, and much of the film documents the precariousness of surfer's lives, which are often dictated by the fickle Irish weather during the 10-week summer season.

Between Land and Sea is notable for its utilisation of novel filming technologies which would have been financially impossible just 10 years earlier (*Waveriders* was shot on 35mm). This was reflective of new filming technologies driven from within the

subculture. These include small action cameras such as the GoPro, and drone photography which offers cinematic landscape and coastal photography which would only have been possible with a helicopter in the previous decade. Small digital cameras in waterproof housings are also utilised for in-water photography and on-boat photography. In one notable moment, a heavy wipeout is filmed at Rileys with a point-of-view action camera (Rileys and Aileens are both spaces where Mickey Smith filmed *Dark Side of the Lens* just 7 years before, and Whitakers film owes an aesthetic debt to the Cornish filmmaker's short film). Whitaker essentially borrows from the craft-based skills that existed in the political economy of subcultural Irish surf films to access this photography, stating that:

> As I started the film, the producers (Anne McLoughlin and Jamie D'Alton) said to me, 'it would be great if you could find a local person who could work with you on the ground'. Thankfully, this happened and I was very lucky to meet Kevin Smith, a brilliant young filmmaker living in the area who was happy to collaborate on the film. I had to overcome my instinct to want to make the on-the-ground creative decisions myself and open myself up to the expertise, knowledge and connections of a locally based person. The rewards, in terms of what we were able to capture with a small but dedicated team, were massive (Whitaker 2017).

Clare based filmmaker Kev. L. Smith began producing visually inventive and influential short surf films and edits in the early 2010s (further discussed in chapter 7). Smith previously provided footage for his brother's surf film collaborations with the unrelated Mickey Smith, before producing his own videos and surf edits. The "craft-based" skills acquired in surf filmmaking led to work in professional screen industries, and he has now provided camera and aerial footage for Irish produced TV series such as *Vikings, Kin,* and RTE's series historical series *The Irish Revolution* (2019). Smith has since worked on a variety of film productions as a director of photography, including Ross Whitakers *Katie* (camera and drone). His 3-minute short surf film *Winter Glow* (2015), featuring Ollie

O'Flaherty, won best film in the "shorties" section of the London Surf Film Festival in 2015. Highlighting the collaborative nature of the short surf film genre, this film also featured footage from Fionn Rogers and Clem McInerney.[34] Smith then produced the *A Life in the Day* (2015), which is a 4-minute-long portrait of surfing life in Lahinch and like a mini version of *Between Land and Sea.* He followed this with the more prosaic short film, *Mistakes Made are Lessons Learnt* (2016), and another Lahinch based reflection featuring Ollie O'Flaherty in *Le Chéile* (2019). This film was screened at the Maine Outdoor Film Festival, the 2019 Portuguese Surf Film Festival, and the Florida Surf Film Festival, amongst others. *Le Chéile* invokes traditional Irish music and language as a means to culturally situate the global form of the surf film within the local environment. Between these films, Smith also co-produced the based web series *Growing* (2014/2015) which documented his brothers surfing and his move into organic farming (just as Whitaker does in his film). It is debatable whether another of Smiths short films, *Taobh le Taobh* (2019), could also be included as a surf film. The film is a short documentary about the artistic process of visual artist Matthew Mitchell and his exploration of texture, surface and topography in the Burren, County Clare. Narrated by Mitchell, it is a mesmeric exploration of time and place and reminiscent of Bob Quinn's short documentaries about Irish culture.

Smith's cinematography, local knowledge, and background in surf filmmaking, was essential to the success of *Between Land and Sea*. Reviewing *Between Land and Sea* in *The Guardian* in March 2018, Cath Clarke admitted that the draw of Whitakers film was based in "phenomenal surfing footage, which captures the brutal beauty of the landscape and surfers gliding through waves so powerful they look as if they could snap a person in

[34] Collaborativity is essential in the short Irish surf film genre, which is further discussed in chapter 7.

half" (Cath Clarke 2018). Most of this footage was shot by Smith, and it is one of the rare examples in Irish surf films of subcultural labour transferring into a mainstream production. In *The Irish Times*, Donald Clarke also praised Smith's photography, suggesting that the film should be seen on the big screen. Clarke felt that whilst *Between Land and Sea* had "fine character studies", that "Kevin Smith's photography is sublime. Shots of roaring waves that push all else out of the screen clarify why the nation has a reputation to compare with the world's most desirable surfing destinations" (Clarke 2017).

Like *Waveriders, Between Land and Sea* was partially funded by public finance (a production model that is uncommon in international surf cinema, with the exception of some Australian surf films). The film was partially funded by the body now known as Coimisiún na Meán. This authority was founded under the 2009 Broadcasting Act and acted as a regulator of broadcasting in Ireland until 2023. As previously mentioned, the film was also coproduced by the Motive Films production company and its producers Annie McLoughlin and Jamie D'Alton, both of whom have produced a large variety of sports-based documentaries, although they're work is not confined to this genre. The Broadcast Authority of Ireland's website articulates that it exists to shape "an Irish media landscape that reflects and shapes who we are" (Broadcasting Authority of Ireland n.d.). One of the goals of the functions of the BAI was to "provide, and award, funding for programming and archiving relating to Irish culture, heritage and experience under the Broadcasting Funding Scheme". It is notable that a surf film was deemed relevant under this relationship to Irish heritage and culture (ibid). The BAI was created to reflect the new multi-platform broadcasting environment in which money raised through television license fees could be distributed beyond traditional sources of public service funding, such as RTE or TG4 programming. The remit of the Broadcasting Fund of the BAI altered the scope of film and television film production in Ireland, recognising the emergent connections

between TV, Film, and online media such as streaming services. This fund was responsible for the financing of a broad variety of drama and fiction films, such as Paddy Breathnach's *Rosie* (2018), produced by Element Pictures, the TV series *Darklands* (2019), nature documentaries such as Ken O'Sullivan's *Deep Atlantic*, and childrens programmes such as *Pablo* (2017 – 2020).

Between Land and Sea was funded under Round 21 of the BAI's Sound & Vision Funding Scheme in 2014. In total, the applicant production company Motive Television Limited received an award of €180, 000 from the scheme for production funding. The original working title of the project when submitted was *Atlantic's Edge* (*Lahinch - The Town That Surf Built*)" (Fitzmahony 2024).[35] The Sound and Vision schemes run by the BAI were financed from the Irish national Broadcast Fund, which comprised 7% of the annual net receipts from television license fees (Broadcasting Authority of Ireland n.d.). It is notable that *Between Land and Sea* received this form of funding because it is clear that by 2014, a surf film fulfilled the remit of the Sound and Vision Scheme, which aimed to:

- Develop high quality programmes based on Irish culture, heritage and experience;
- Develop these programmes in the Irish language;
- Represent the diversity of Irish culture and heritage;
- Record oral Irish heritage and aspects of Irish heritage which are disappearing, under threat, or have not been previously recorded, and;
- Develop local and community broadcasting (ibid).

To achieve these objectives, the Scheme offered funding grants to new television and radio programmes which dealt with the themes of:

[35] I requested this information from Coimisiún na Meán. Ita Fitzmahony, the chief executive officer for Coimisiún na Meán responded by email directly to my request.

- Irish culture, heritage and experience;
- Improving adult or media literacy;
- Raising public awareness and understanding of global issues impacting on the State and countries other than the State; and/or
- Any of the above in the Irish language (ibid).

Clearly surfing - and the depiction of the activity on film - had arrived at a point in the Irish cultural experience where the fund saw the activity within the framework of the "Irish culture, heritage, or experience based" criteria. This implies that the activity now constitutes a level of association with Irishness that it should be sponsored by public funds.[36] In addition to this postmodern idea of surfing as Irish heritage, the films mode of public funding through this scheme meant that it was also used as a classroom learning resource in Ireland for the junior certificate in English and Religious education, in conjunction between RTE television and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. The English component for students strikingly breaks down the simple and universal narrative components which create dramatic elements in *Between Land and Sea*, from its storytelling techniques and scene setting, to character development, complications, and narrative resolutions (RTÉ 2020).

The supporting broadcaster at the time of submission to the Sound and Vision Scheme was *EirSport*, who were considered an eligible broadcaster under the terms of the Sound & Vision II Funding Scheme. *EirSport* committed to broadcast the project free to air at peak time (7pm – 11pm) which was a key requirement of the funding (Fitzmahony 2024).[42] The role of the short-lived digital broadcasters *Eirsport* and *Setanta Sports* in the

[36] Chapter six will show how similar criteria were applied to Alice Rosaline Ward's short film *Ebb and Flow* by Sligo County Council. [42] This information was also provided by Ita Fitzmahony, the chief executive officer for Coimisiún na Meán.

financing and production of Irish sports films is an unexplored area within academic studies of Irish screen media and Irish sport studies. Eirsport was a group of Irish sports television channels owned by Eircom Sport Ltd, which was part of the EIR group. The EIR group was a privately-owned Irish telecommunications company which originated from Telecom Eireann, Ireland's formerly state-owned telecommunications company (which itself emerged from the Ministry for Posts and Telegraphs in the new Irish republic). The channels Eirsport 1 and 2 were the successors to the Setanta Sport group when the company's Irish stations where bought by Eirsport. Their focus on the creation and funding of Irish sports films and documentaries emerged from this relationship. Although now an international television company, Setanta was originally an Irish owned UK based sports broadcaster with a clear Irish focus in its broadcasting. The station was part of a shift to digital subscription broadcasting which occurred in 2006 (Debrett 2009) and began the television broadcast – and the commercialisation and marketisation of League of Ireland soccer, Gaelic Football, Irish provincial rugby, and even Irish school's rugby. The Setanta brand was replaced by Eirsport in 2016 but the ethos remained, and its cultural influence on the production of *Between Land and Sea* is significant because prior to the establishment of these channels, there was no means of consistent sports film production and exhibition in Ireland. Although Eirsport finished broadcasting in October 2021, its role alongside Setanta in the creation and sustaining a new economy of 'national' Irish sports films should not be overlooked.

Between Land and Sea was later acquired and broadcast by RTÉ (Fitzmahony 2024). Whitakers film had its Irish television premiere on 20th August on RTE 2 at 10.15pm 2019, before streaming on the RTE Player for 1 month. *Between Land and Sea* also played in selected theatres around Ireland, such as the Irish Film Institute (two sold out screenings) in 2016, before selling out 8 times in row in Dublin, Cork and Waterford

(Whitaker 2017). The film was also screened at the DocPoint Film Festival in Finland, amongst other festivals. Whitaker noted that that a "good local story can have international resonance" but expressed some surprise at the films popular and financial success, which showed that Irish surf films could be consumed by wider audiences that the subcultural community:

> Despite being a low-budget, obscure film and not in position to get distribution (with broadcasts coming soon and without Irish Film Board support, we were not an attractive proposition for distributors!), the film has surprised us in how it has managed to find an audience. I must remind myself in future that audiences do want to see honestly made films about other human beings and throw in some lovely landscapes and surfing and you might be amazed at what a film can achieve (ibid).

After its domestic release and the broadcast requirements of its funding, *Between Land and Sea* entered into international markets. The film secured multiple distribution deals after exhibition at the Cannes film market in 2017, and it was then distributed globally by the Cercamon sales agency, with releases in Australia, New Zealand, China and South Korea. The film made roughly $30,000 dollars internationally through its release in Australia, where it grossed $17, 516, New Zealand (where the film made $95) and South Korea, where the film made $4000 on its opening night, and $12481 in gross total (Box Office Mojo n.d.). No figures are available for the films Chinese release. Reflecting the new multiplatform environment that the Broadcast Authority of Ireland had been preparing for, *Between Land and Sea* is now available to rent in Ireland on the IFI player, and housed internationally on the Apple TV Player, and Vimeo on Demand in some regions. The film was also distributed by Film Movement on DVD and online. Unlike the national marketing campaign which drove the cinematic release of Joel Conroy's *Waveriders* in 2008, Ross Whitaker noted that a key aspect in the marketing of *Between Land and Sea* was social media:

> Facebook has been key for us in getting the word out and a good trailer can spread the word fast about a film. Since my last film…the media landscape has shifted and social media has become even more important. In addition, there are more media outlets than ever and if you cater to their needs, a film can get a lot of exposure even without a publicity budget (Whitaker 2017).

Its close relationship with the genre of subcultural Irish surf films provided *Between Land and Sea* with subcultural capital which laid the foundations for its relative success (relative because the film was seen by international audiences, but did not generate a large amount of economic capital). Kev L. Smith's cinematography came from a pre-existing subcultural craft-based economy that by this point was so technically proficient that it began to influence mainstream production culture.

5.4 - Conclusion

This chapter analysed the production models of two publicly financed Irish surf films, whose funding structures position them within the framework of national cinema. It demonstrated that this mode of economic support does not align with the dominant forms of political economy typically associated with Irish surf film production, which tend to be more independent and subculturally driven. However, through close textual analysis, the chapter also revealed that both films were strongly influenced by surfing subculture in their themes, aesthetics, and narratives. The following chapters explore alternative models of finance and funding that operate, for the most part, outside of the public or institutional supports that support mainstream filmmaking, and beyond dominant ideas in media political economy.

Ruth Barton has shown that documentaries have become one of the most prolific modes of Irish filmmaking and that these documentaries are "formally diverse and resistant to categorization" (2020, 91). She notes that whilst documentaries are widely screened on Irish television and Irish cinema, they "remain very local in their funding and address" (ibid). The films described in this chapter are representative of this growth in documentary

filmmaking. *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea* could be regarded as locally niche, but both films found international audiences (although small) based on their status as examples of the international surf film genre. Neither film is representative of the majority of subcultural Irish surf films described in this thesis, but both films are grounded in subculture. Both films are significant because their publicly financed economies are the exception rather than the rule in the production of surf films in Ireland in that they are connected to mainstream practices of film production, distribution, and finance in Ireland, as described by Rockett (1987), Barton (2004, 2020) and Flynn and Tracy (2017). This budgetary scope provided them with full production and post production teams, and allowed for greater breadth in narrative and production values than subcultural examples of the genre. These films located an international audience at festivals and through DVD releases and streaming platforms after their initial exhibition obligations, which were bound by their public finances. In the case of *Between Land and Sea* this was because of its status as a hybrid text with the universal narrative themes of the sports documentary, rather than simply a locally produced Irish surf film. *Waveriders* value arguably lies in its status as a cult Irish film which was markedly different from most film board supported Irish films of the era (in that it was the only fulllength feature film about surfing supported by the Board)[37].

Barton goes on to remark that "so focused are Irish documentaries on exploring Irish places and identities, both in the past and now, that it would not be a stretch to argue that they are the true claimants to the mantle of a national cinema" (ibid). Most films described in this thesis fall outside the boundaries of what can be termed 'national cinema'. However, both *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea* can lay claim to being

[37] I have personally attended screenings of this film at events such as the Electric Picnic music festival.

representatives of this framework. Both provide a focus on rural communities in the West of Ireland which is reflective of new Irish documentaries "interest in geographically and socially marginalised identities" (92), and both are indicative of the political economy of national cinema in their modes of financing, production, marketing, exhibition, and distribution (see definition in the introduction to this chapter). The contemporary reimagining of surfing as reflective of Irish culture and heritage was how both films acquired public funding, although it is ironic that the original funding aim of *Waveriders* was to reflect postnational culture on the island of Ireland in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement. *Between Land and Sea* reflects the blurred boundaries between contemporary film and television production and distribution that should arguably lead to a transition in terminology from national cinema to national screen media. Both films highlight the changing ways in which Irish identity is represented in national media in the 21st century, serving as compelling examples of how evolving cultural landscapes challenge static interpretations of Irish culture.

Chapter 6 – Crowdfunding and Long Form Documentary in the Political Economy of *Into the Sea* (Marion Poizneau 2016) and *The Crest* (Mark Corvino 2017)

This chapter examines the production and distribution of two crowdfunded Irish surf films, highlighting how these projects rely on grassroots support and digital platforms to secure financing. It explores how crowdfunding offers an alternative political economy which fosters direct engagement between filmmakers and their audiences. Through analysis of both films, the chapter demonstrates how crowdfunded films often blur the line between community and amateur driven productions and entrepreneurial media practices, marking a distinct departure from both publicly funded and commercially driven models of media production.

6.1 - Introduction

This chapter critically interrogates the political economy of two crowdfunded documentaries; *Into the Sea* (Marion Poizneau 2016), which relied on its Irish star Easkey Britton to generate its crowdfunding, and *The Crest* (Mark Corvino 2017), which was financially dependent on the Irish diaspora. The emergence of crowdfunding as a dependable means of film financing since 2008 has created new forms of economy which have challenged orthodox modes of film financing and production. Crowdfunding also provides a significant challenge to practical interpretations of economics, and theoretical interpretations of political economy in film, media, and communication studies. Online crowdfunding is a practical example of what can be described as an autonomous form of political economy; that is, an economy which exists according to its own distinct principles of production and consumption, which, in this case, are separate to dominant models of film and television financing. As a result of their economic autonomy, crowdfunded films are often also politically and ideologically autonomous in their narratives, subject matter, and content. *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* reflect these autonomous characteristics, and this chapter examines the challenge of crowdfunding to traditional interpretations of economics and political economy through the analysis of both films.

The years prior to 2010 were a period of transition in the political economy of subcultural surf films, predicated upon technological transition and interlinked novel social, technological, and economic innovations. These innovations included the Digital Single Lens Reflex (DLSR) camera revolution, which occurred between 2008 and 2014 (Nutkas 2018), the emergence of online crowdfunding as a major source of project financing by 2009, the growth of video hosting platforms (Vimeo began hosting high definition video in 2009), and the mass proliferation of visually based forms of social media as a means of costless marketing (Instagram was founded in 2009). This chapter analyses *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* in order to understand how their funding benefited from, and responded to, the social, technological and economic changes which were indicative of the period. The next chapter will analyse the dominant form of cultural production in the Irish surf film genre during the period between 2010 and 2019; the short surf films known as "edits". However, an analysis of the growth of edits does not encapsulate the breadth of this genre, or their novel economies, and they must be separated from other long form films of the same period.

The films analysed in this chapter also display modes of political economy which are unique to their production. Both *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* were facilitated in their financing, production, exhibition, and reception by networked technologies that encouraged new forms of cultural production, such as crowdfunded documentaries. Both films are reflective of wider changes in the economies of film and television production, and the transition to 'screen' economies, both in Ireland and internationally. This analysis examines the political economy of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* at primary and secondary levels. Whilst their economy remains primary, this thesis has argued that a comprehensive interpretation of political economy requires a holistic approach to any given topic. For example, celebrity and stardom played an important economic role in how *Into the Sea* was

crowdfunded, and in why it can be interpreted as an Irish surf film. Equally, the Irish diaspora was of preeminent importance in the political economy of *The Crest*.

Just as the academic analysis of Irish cinema in the 20th century was often constituted by filmed images of Ireland created from outside the island, such as America, or Britain (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill 1987), or the analysis of the role of Irish stars and celebrities in foreign film industries (Barton 2006), just what constitutes examples of the Irish surf film can often fall under a variety of definitions. For example, *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* are both very different films which display the eclectic qualities of the genre. Both can be described as Irish (for reasons the chapter will outline), yet both could also be argued to be exogenous texts. As the introduction to this thesis has shown, Irish surf films fall predominantly within a category of documentaries made in, or about Ireland, with surfing as a dominant narrative theme. These films consist of a wide variety of interrelated indigenous and exogenous texts, almost all of which have influenced each other. Irish surf films are most commonly produced within the Irish surfing subculture, but the genre also includes films made by mainstream production companies about the subculture, films made by the Irish diaspora, films made by peripatetic non-Irish surfers, and films starring or produced by Irish surfers (*Into the Sea*). Indeed, in the case of *Into the Sea*, it hardly makes sense to describe the film as an indigenous *or* an exogenous Irish surf film, let alone an example of any territorial interpretation of filmmaking. This challenge to orthodoxy is one of the distinct socio-political characteristics of the economies of crowdfunding and one of the challenges it offers to classical economics. The difficulty in considering crowdfunded films as examples of national, transnational, or even international films, lies in the fact that these definitions are based on the interaction of *national* entities (public bodies, major production companies), rather than by *individuals* in different national locations. Online crowdfunding engages individuals and communities on a global scale,

and in this sense crowdfunded films are beyond the national, existing in a space where terms such as postnational, or even metanational, might help to define their associations with cultural identity.

Into the Sea and *The Crest* film push at the generic boundaries of the international surf film, and the subgenre of Irish surf films. The economic (or subcultural) success of a genre is due to the ways in which it induces desire and pleasure in its audience through tensions between repetition and difference, and the rational for the crowdfunding of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* was predicated on the premise that both films offered novel approaches to the genre. Genres and crowdfunding share the common characteristics of being communal enterprises, watched and funded by the generic community (in this case the surfing subculture), for whom the consumption of genre films acts as a form of social ritual. Critically, this community are also often the main funders when surf films are produced through crowd financing and the main audience/consumers when the films are distributed online.

6.2 - Emergent Production Technologies and the Political Economy of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest*

Before undertaking an analysis of the political economy of both films, it is important to outline some critical factors in the production of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* in order to fully understand their novel economies. Both films emerged as a consequence of convergent social, economic, and technological developments in the late 2000s which had a major influence on modes of financing, production, exhibition, and distribution of Irish surf films. Alongside crowdfunding, one of the key interrelated developments was in film exhibition, where video sharing platforms offered amateur and professional surf videographers, and

filmmakers almost cost-free modes of exhibition to wide potential audiences. Given the production costs and financial losses of well-funded and industrially marketed examples of Irish surf cinema such as *Waveriders*, and the costs involved in the production of subcultural DVDs, this explains why free video sharing became desirable for subcultural surf filmmakers in the years after 2010. YouTube was founded in 2002, but engaged in the "Broadcast Yourself" era between 2006 and 2013 where its mass popularity acquired 43% of the market share in video sharing by 2010 (comScore 2010). Many amateur Irish surf filmmakers utilised YouTube as a means to display their films, such as Jules Charlton's *The Dimming Tide: A Dublin Surf Odyssey* (2012). However, Vimeo became the desired online space of the Irish surf edit. Vimeo was founded in 2004, but began offering High Definition content delivery in 2009 which attracted amateur and professional filmmakers of documentaries, fiction films, music videos, and Avant Garde/experimental films. Vimeo has typically been regarded as offering more for its creators and it has retained its own independent "hipster vibe" because it offers a less commercialised online space (Parker 2011). Since 2015, filmmakers can also monetise films through the Vimeo-On-Demand service, which requires users to pay a fee to watch films. Irish surf films were also able to generate economic and social capital through paid subscription streaming platforms. For example, *Into the Sea* and *The Crest,* and are also available on the Amazon Prime streaming service (which began offering content in 2006), amongst others. Some films have also been made available on *The Surf Network*, a dedicated streaming service for surf cinema.

Alongside crowdfunding, video platforms, and paid streaming services, of particular importance in the establishment of Irish surf films as a genre was the development of participatory online communities on social media and their close relationship with video sharing platforms (Vimeo was one of the first sites to offer a 'thumbs up' as a means to like a post). Images, scenes, and film clips are easily posted to online applications such as

Facebook and Instagram, with hyperlinks to online video sharing platforms such as Vimeo. Founded in 2009, Instagram offered what at the time was a unique photo and video sharing social networking platform that has become popular with surf photographers, videographers, and filmmakers, such as Clem McInerney, who utilises the platform to distribute clips and information regarding his latest video projects (McInerney n.d.). The Irish Surf Film Festival has also used this platform to convey images, clips, and sometimes whole films, on its Instagram page.

A final element of technological convergence which allowed the genre to proliferate was the development of relatively cheap high definition action cameras, such as the GoPro action camera, and the advent of widely available DLSR and HD DLSR Cameras, which are responsible for what Nuska (2018) describes as the DLSR revolution in documentary and ethnographic filmmaking, which he places as occurring between 2008 and 2014 (2018).[38] The 'GoPro' camera (which is now just one of many brands of small action cameras) was founded by Nick Woodman in 2002 with the express intention of providing amateur surfers with the ability to film their activities with the same competence as professional cinematographers and videographers (Mac 2013). Another technological change was in live preview digital screens which allow photographers to see their filmed images whilst in underwater photography casings. The implications of these technological changes on autonomous forms of political economy played a significant role in how *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* were produced.

[38] This concept will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

Techno-economic changes - such as the ability to crowdfund a film - reflected the gradual convergence of surf cinema with the online visual culture of social media, smartphones and streaming platforms. Crowdfunding also placed subcultural filmmaking such as surf cinema at the vanguard of technological change and innovation in the production and financing of screen media. The following analyses of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* will show that the proliferation of films within this genre was not predicated on a clearly definable or standardised system of production or financing, and that in many cases, the economies of Irish surf films challenge dominant interpretations of classical economics and theoretical political economy, offering an autonomous alternative to mainstream film and documentary production.

6.3 - Crowdfunding, Celebrity, and Postnational Feminism in Marion Poizneau's *Into the Sea*

In a press release for Marion Poizneau's crowdfunded documentary *Into the Sea*, a documentary depicting the birth of surfing in Iran led by a woman from Donegal, the film is described as displaying "the recognition of the power of surfing to transcend social, cultural and gender barriers" (Into the Sea n.d.). Such ambitious claims regarding surf and lifestyle films often appear disingenuous, but Poizneau's film, starring Irish surfer Easkey Britton, offered much more than standard fare common in the surf film genre; or what Douglas Booth describes as "adolescent fun" (1996). This section posits that *Into the Sea* can be included as part of the Irish surf film genre, but it will also ask how a globally crowdfunded film depicting the birth of surfing in Iran can be regarded as an Irish surf film, or indeed a French film, or an Iranian film. One of the most interesting aspects in the analysis of *Into the Sea* is that national, transnational, and international definitions of films

and cinema industries gradually cease to make sense when discussing the economy of crowdfunding, because its mode of economy challenges historic interpretations of economics; its markets are global, but not national. Yet *Into the Sea* can be situated within the study of the Irish surf film genre for a variety of reasons. The clearest is that the films crowd-financed economy was driven by the celebrity and stardom of a well-known Irish surfer and personality, Easkey Britton. Britton is a major figure in the Irish and international surfing subculture who had also already received significant attention in Irish and global media. Britton's integral role in the production is noted by the Donegal Film Office (a resource for filmmakers in Donegal run by Donegal County Council) which records the film as on its own on its website, not only because its star is from Donegal, but also because some sequences in the film are shot in the county (Donegal Film Office n.d).

Into the Sea is a 52-minute-long documentary directed by Marion Poizneau, edited by Bahman Kiarostami (son of the now deceased - and disgraced - Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami), and starring a celebrity surfer (Britton) from Rossnowlagh in County Donegal. The film undoubtably broke new ground in the history of the surf film genre. *Into the Sea* also broke new ground for women's sport in Iran, striking a blow for Iranian feminism simply through the act of filming young Iranian women learning to surf in male dominated spaces. It also marked an influential shift in surf cinema whereby surfing was positioned as an empowering and inclusive activity for women against what were historically male dominated power structures, and also against repressive political environments.[39] *Into the Sea* is the first and only film directed by French filmmaker Marion Poizneau. The film emerged from a 3 ½ minute short surf edit titled *Surf En Iran* (2010) on which Poizneau originally collaborated with Britton. This short film featured the

[39] See *Gaza Surf Club* (Gnadt and Yamine, 2013) and *Girls Can't Surf* (Christopher Nelius, 2020)

Donegal woman surfing in the southern Iranian province of Baluchistan; the first time anyone had surfed in Iran in the country's history. *Surf En Iran* was posted on Vimeo and Youtube in 2010, emerging from what was then the new subcultural form that can be described as online "edits". In these short surfing "edits", the filmed surfer is often the driving force of the production, often seeking exposure within the subculture, either for social or economic capital (this will be described in the next chapter). The striking juxtaposition in *Surf En Iran* of imagery of a fair skinned, Donegal woman surfing in full hijab in the far south of Iran went viral and made headlines internationally. After the online success of *Surf En Iran*, Britton and Poizneau raised finance through crowdfunding to return to Iran in 2013 to film the longform documentary, *Into the Sea*, which was then released online and in selected cinemas and film festivals in 2014.

Into the Sea was crowdfunded on the *Indiegogo* platform, an American crowdfunding platform founded in 2008 (*Indiegogo* was quickly followed by *Kickstarter.com* in 2009, which is where the second film analysed in this chapter, *The Crest*, raised its funding). As defined by Judd Hollas in the *Corporate Finance Review*, crowdfunding represents a "practice of funding a project or venture by raising many small amounts of money from a large number of people, typically via the Internet" (2013, 27). Early forms of crowdfunding as a means to finance filmmaking date to the 1980s, but the emergence of online crowdfunding platforms in the early 2000s significantly accelerated this process. Globally, the crowdfunding economy is now worth roughly 1.05 billion dollars annually in market turnover, with a wide array of possible platform choices for filmmakers such as *GoFundMe*, *We Funder*, *Indiegogo* and *Kickstarter* (Statista 2025). By 2013, crowdfunding was worth £360 Million pounds to the UK market (Sorenson 2015). Some platforms offer different systems of crowdfunding, with *Kickstarter* and *Indiegogo* offering donation and reward-based systems of funding for creative projects, such as film

and music production, whereas platforms such as *Gambitious* links game developers with investors, and *Seedrs* specifically caters for start-up businesses. Crowdfunding is now a common practice in subcultural surf filmmaking; this trend can be seen in the popular films *View From a Blue Moon* (Florence, Kueny 2015) and *Unstoppable* (Lieber 2019). Crowdfunding is now also common across all categories of film production, although it has been particularly important to the rise of online documentary filmmaking. Crowdfunding is also responsible for the financing of high-profile narrative fiction films, such as Rob Thomas and Kristen Bell's *Veronica Mars* (2014) film and Zach Braff's *Wish I Was Here* (2014). Most film financing through crowdfunding is considered as a form of donation (Fanea-Ivanovici 2019, 8), although alternative definitions exist, including equity-based crowdfunding, lending-based crowdfunding, and reward-based crowdfunding (Hossain and Oparaocha 2017).

Crowdfunded films often emerge from personal, rather than industrial, relationships. As a result of this personal element, conflicting stories emerge from Poizneau and Britton regarding their original trip to Iran, and the production of both *Surf En Iran*, and *Into the Sea*. The personal nature of the production is also a reason why exact figures and sums of money relating to this films production are extremely difficult to ascertain[40], but this is a wider problem in the culture of crowdfunding. Requests for funding for a project then known as "Waves of Freedom" were published in a wide range of publications such as *Surf Europe* and *Vogue* Magazine Arabia (Mondy 2013). No online *Indiegogo* record remains for this project, but Poizneau also financed the film through the French crowdfunding platform *KissKissBankBank.com* specifically for post-production,

[40] I requested information from Indiegogo and from Marion Poizneau regarding exact amount of money this project received through crowdfunding. Indiegogo refused my request on the basis that this information is private to the producers. No reply has been forthcoming from Poizneau.

editing, and distribution, where the film raised €5541 from a requested amount of €4500 (from 54 international backers).[41] In a 2015 interview, Poizneau stated that:

> The idea came from a friend of mine who knew that nobody was surfing in Iran but who also knew that there was good surf in the southeast of the country. In 2010, he connected me with Easkey Britton, a professional female surfer from Ireland, and the three of us planned to meet up in Iran. Unfortunately, my friend missed his flight, so Easkey and I met up in Tehran instead and decided to keep going with the adventure without him. That's how the story became 100 percent feminine (Poizneau 2015).

Yet in a 2014 article and interview in the surf industry standard *Surfer* Magazine, Britton is clearly marked as the originator and driving force of the production (Housman 2014). Somewhat differently from Poizneau's account, Britton describes that "A friend-of-a-friend who worked for Lonely Planet actually encouraged me to go; he'd been in Pakistan and saw surf there, and he wondered if there was surf around the corner in Iran" (ibid). Prior to its release in 2014, the project was still titled *Waves of Freedom* and supposedly tied to a nonprofit organisation which would continue to encourage female surfing in Iran by supplying equipment and support in the aftermath of the film's release (O'Rourke 2014). This organisation does not appear to have ever existed, but *Into the Sea* is still available for rental and purchase on streaming websites such as Amazon Prime, Vimeo, and Webedia. This raises questions about who is currently profiting from the film; the filmmaker and its star, or the streaming platforms that now house the film.

Poizneau's film is a feminist documentary travelogue, filmed over 2 weeks, concerning Easkey Britton's almost evangelical attempts to bring surfing to the women of Iran. Like many celebrity driven documentaries, *Into the Sea* is set up as a Britton's personal journey, emphasising her desire for the search, wherein she states that travel and

[41] The web page for this record is https://www.kisskissbankbank.com/en/projects/les-femmesintroduisent-le-surf-en-iran (accessed 20/05/2024). However, since my enquiries this page has been removed.

exploration are what motivates her as a surfer. In this sense, the film is completely typical of the surf film genre extending to the early 1950s; find a new spot, surf it, film it. Britton's narration emphasises the "crowd free" element of the coastline and states that she was able to surf completely alone; another key desire within the genre (which is also inherently problematic, as described in the chapter on subcultural politics). Poizneau and her star clearly recognised that the novelty of images of surfing in Iran would not sustain a 52-minute film. As a result, *Into the Sea* also explores gender roles in Iranian society, and particularly the relationship between women, social class, politics, religion, and sporting activity. The film also offers many clear and explicit critiques of theocratic law in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Figure 27: Easkey Britton meets with locals in Into the Sea.

The narrative of *Into the Sea* begins with Britton explaining her close relationship with the sea and her urge to push at the geographic and masculine boundaries of the surfing world. The film charts Britton's original trip to Iran in 2010 and the online connection she established with two Iranian women after the film's release; Iranian

professional snowboarder Mona Seraji (the first woman to work as a snowboard instructor in Iran) and Iranian diver Shalha Yasini. Britton articulates that their aim is to empower Iranian women and dismantle cultural barriers by introducing surfing to their community, however it does appear that the novelty of surfing in Iran is a major part of the film in the context of the overall genre. The group are initially unsure of how they will be treated by locals when they travel to Chabahar in Baluchistan, south Eastern Iran, and gain permission to surf at a private beach (in hijab). Their presence is questioned by a domestic security guard, and when they eventually are allowed to pass, Poizneau lingers on the closing of gates and on the group breaking the through the fence as symbolic images of the breaking of barriers. They soon approach local male leaders for permission to surf at a public beach, where Britton's presence means that the group are asked to meet with local elders of the community, and the local member of parliament for Chabahar, who iterates the women can surf as long as they wear the hejab. This claim is treated with scepticism by Seraji and Yasini, who claim that this is lip service because of the presence of the filmmakers, and that no women will actually begin surfing as strict interpretations of Islamic law make it prohibitive. Britton notes that the sea is largely the domain of men, highlighted in a scene where the women are unable to access a beach until a group of local men finish frolicking in the water. Both Seraji and Yasini articulate that their desire is to get Iranians to surf, but also to develop the area for surf tourism, where they could establish a women-only beach, where women could surf without the need for the hejab. Britton's narration emphasises that regardless of the hospitality extended to her, she "struggles to accept how women are kept in the background". Poizneau extends this perspective in a sequence filmed in a Tehran judo club, where a local cleric ambiguously declares that sporting activity is allowed for women, but "if women who practice sports corrupt the minds of our youth, then that exercise is not allowed".

Figure 28: Britton and colleagues symbolically breaking barriers in Into the Sea.

Into the Sea generated a significant amount of international press attention, much of it driven by a focus on its Irish star and co-producer, Easkey Britton. The film also made a significant impact in surfing industry publications such as *Surfers Journal* (June/July 2016), *Surfer Magazine*, *Surf Europe*, and others, but it also received major international attention from international media such as *Le Monde*, NBC, the BBC, *Vogue* Magazine, *Marie Claire* magazine, *The Guardian*, and *The Irish Times*. When critics from the Irish and international press eventually reviewed the film, the tone of critique tended to focus on its courageous feminist stance, its activist qualities, and its political message, rather than any perceived quality of the film. Much of this press attention focused on Britton's stardom and her feminist activism, such as an article published on *Oprah.com* titled "Easkey Britton: Helping Girls in Iran Find Their Sea Legs" (Sims 2015), or a typically incredulous report in The UK's *Daily Mail* titled "Surfing in a hijab! Meet the inspirational Irish surf champion who teaches women to ride the waves in the far corner of IRAN" (Leadbetter 2015).

The films distribution was characterised by screenings at varied festivals in the industrial nodes of the contemporary film festival circuit. *Into the Sea* premiered at the London Surf Film Festival in 2014, and won the award for the best surf documentary at the Paris Surf and Skate Film Festival in the same year. It also an award for best Peace and Sport Documentary at SPORTEL in 2014 (a global sports and media convention), and was selected for screening at the Cinema Verite Festival in Tehran, the Doc-a-Tunisie Film Festival, and the Honolulu Surf Film Festival, amongst others. *Into the Sea* was also screened at the Shore Shots Film Festival in Ireland in 2014. I introduced the Irish premiere of this film on the 16th of January 2014 to a fully booked audience at the Bundoran cineplex in County Donegal, followed by an audience Q & A with the films local star, Easkey Britton. *Into the Sea* was also released to watch on Vimeo.com and eventually released on the Amazon prime streaming service, The Surf Network, Apple TV, and Wedbedia (a French company which specialises in online media). The film was also broadcast across some international television platforms, and the film is also available to view on the Alexander Street online educational video platform, in a section titled "Look what SHE Did".[42]

6.4 - Stardom, Surf Movies, and the Crowdfunding of *Into the Sea*

A common feature in the political economy of the surf film genre is the development of stars within their production cultures. No academic work exists on this topic, but this surf movie stardom mimics patterns in industrial produced mainstream filmmaking. As already noted in this thesis, surf films often have their own unique industrial nodes (social media, websites, magazines, video platforms, localised screenings,

[42] Alexander Street is a large online academic database publisher.

film festivals, etc), which play a key role creating and curating the representation of stars within the culture. Beyond these subcultural nodes, stars of surf culture, such as Easkey Britton, Alaistair Mennie, and Richard Fitzgerald are also constructed and mythologised by mainstream media, both in print, online, and on television and radio. In considering the economic role of stars within the Irish surf film, it is worth utilising Barry King's theoretical framework which was designed to "develop a means of reconciling a political economy approach to stardom in mainstream (Hollywood) cinema and the theorisation of the star as an interplay of representation and identification" (1991, 169). Kings work is based in the representative performativity of film stars as actors for stage and screen, rather than as personalities within subcultural films, and whilst there are obvious key differences when applied to the political economy of stars within the surf film genre (which features real people, capable of doing real things, predominantly filmed in documentary format), it can be understood in these terms if surf films are regarded as a form of creative non-fiction, rather than observational documentaries (a concept that will be analysed in the next chapter). Creative non-fiction implies that the story being told has some relationship with the 'truth' in the documentary sense, but it also recognises that the truth being told is somehow altered for literary or editorial effect.[43] This alternative truth engenders a form of subcultural performativity which play out in the meanings and values that the stars represent.

It must then be asked what Easkey Britton represents in her performative role as a star of *Into the Sea*, or in other productions such as Andrew Kaineder's 2018 film *A Lunar Cycle* (discussed in the next chapter)? How is Britton's star appeal constructed by surf

[43] A substantial amount of academic enquiry exists regarding the subject of creative non-fiction. For wider definitions and interpretations see works such as Lee Gutkind's *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality* (2007), or Bret Lott's *Toward a Definition of Creative Non-Fiction* (2000).

films and the media of the surfing subculture? By the time *Into the Sea* was released in 2016, Britton could be considered one of the stars of this subculture in Ireland, the UK, and internationally, for over a decade. *Surfer* magazine and *Surf Europe* noted that Britton was the central figure in production of *Into the Sea* and in how the film came to be crowdfunded and marketed online and at screenings and festivals. Britton had already appeared in Irish surf films, such as the aforementioned *Sea Fever* and *The Silver Surfari*, and she was the sole female surfing star in Joel Conroy's *Waveriders*. Her status as a star of the subculture extends beyond early film appearances; it is based in surfing prowess and her centrality in the historical formation of Irish surfing subculture and community (Britton's name stems from the name of a surf break in County Sligo, and her father Barry is one of the pioneering Britton brothers of Rossnowlagh, County Donegal).

Surfers that appear as central protagonists in surf films are primarily chosen for their surfing prowess and their relationship with either localised or global surfing communities and industries. Some may be professional surfers (surfers who engage in professional competition), others may be 'soul' or 'free' surfers, but they are most often figures who can earn some form of economic capital *or* subcultural social capital from their appearances in the film. As a result, celebrity figures that star in these films are those that have built a reputation in a local, national, or international community, and are therefore recognizable personalities, with distinct symbolic qualities. In the Irish and international surfing subculture, Easkey Britton is such a symbolic, and arguably iconic, figure. Britton has been a competition surfer but is now a symbolic 'soul surfer'. She is a five-time national womens surf champion (and a big wave surfer) with a PhD in marine science and a popular author, a social, political, and environmental activist, and an outspoken feminist surfer. By the time of *Into the Sea's* release, Britton had also appeared in and written surfing travelogues and articles for *Tonnta* (a now defunct Irish surfing

magazine), *Carve* magazine (a major UK surfing publication with international reach), and even conducted a TedX talk in 2014 (which has gained over 50,000 views on YouTube). Britton promotes the role of the ocean in mental health, and is an outspoken critic of the role of surfing (and other practices) in ocean pollution. Britton maintains and cultivates an active presence and persona on social media, and her international profile has recently grown through her publication of books such as 5*0 Things to Do by the Sea* (2021), *Ebb and Flow* (2023), and another articulation of her personal story in the self-help memoir *Saltwater in the Blood* (2021). Beyond her own social media, much of Britton's mediated representation is beyond her control. Her mediated and constructed identity as a feminist ocean activist by international surfing media can be seen in a short video edit released by the World Surf League (WSL) titled "We Are One Ocean" (2021), which signals her virtues by stating that "for Irish Marine Social Scientist and surfer Dr. Easkey Britton, the ocean is a part of her. It is in her name, in her history, in the soul of her nation, in the core of her being. In Easkey's world, all life revolves around the ocean" (World Surf League 2021). Nationally, Britton has been cast as a role model in milk advertisements for *An Bord Bia*, and in a vast amount of newspaper and online articles. Her position as a star of Irish surf films was delineated in a 2018 article by *Joe.ie* on the release of the short film *A Lunar Cycle* which stated that "Ireland looks stunning in this new surfing film starring one of Ireland's greatest surfers" (JOE.ie 2018). The article quotes Britton who argued that *A Lunar Cycle* "explores themes not yet visited in surf films – fusing coldwater surfing, dance, poetry, prose and natural cycles of the body and nature, capturing my sea connection in winter in Ireland" (ibid).

This discourse in the surfing community which casts Britton as a feminist social activist has also led her to a role as a brand ambassador for the British lifestyle clothing brand *Finisterre* (who funded and produced Kaineder's *A Lunar Cycle*). In this sense,

Britton's celebrity reflects the relationship between many surf films and the political economy of surfing industries, as described in chapter two. This relationship between lifestyle brands and the sponsored performativity of starring roles in surf films is articulated by Richard Dyer in his analysis of Hollywood stars, stating that "stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces" (2006, 5). This image is also "extensive, multimedia, intertextual" (ibid). Britton's starring role in *A Lunar Cycle* highlights this process to a greater extent than *Into the Sea*, because the film is partially subsidised by a surf lifestyle company.

Although *Into the Sea* is directed by Marion Poizneau, and her parents Serge and Genevieve are listed as co-producers with Britton, it is clear that crowdfunding for the *Into the Sea* would not have been achieved if not for the attention Britton was able to bring to film through interviews and exposure in both subcultural media and Irish national media. Britton dominates the film though her narratorial presence and her story, is central to the narrative of the film. The film begins with Britton's voice stating "I'm Easkey, and the sea is my home", and her name is also the first to appear on the credits.

Britton's performative celebrity in films such as *Into the Sea*, *Waveriders*, and *A Lunar Cycle* provide an example of how film stardom can emerge from alternative mediated frameworks. It also highlights that the political economy of stardom in surf films exists as a parallel to industries such as Hollywood. Both share characteristics in that their stars are often regarded as commodities for film, Television or online industries. Dyer outlines that stars emerge from the "production-consumption dialectic of mass-communications" in which they are a phenomenon of production (which arises from producers provide) and out of consumption (arising from what audiences come to desire) (1998, 7-9). In this sense, stars of surf films and culture, such as Alaistair Mennie (who

was part of a 4-part Channel 4 series in 2014 title *Man Vs Wave*), and Easkey Britton are created through an interdependent relationship between the producers of surf films, and the audiences who consume them as performative images of fantasy and desire. Dyer shows that stars are essential to industrial forms of economics. Britton's role as a star of *Into the Sea* and *A Lunar Cycle* – and other stars of surf films - can be understood in his assertion that stars are an essential component in the flow of capital because of their role in investment in films, their role in outlay (a films budget), and their role in the market in which the films are consumed. In this sense, stars are symbols, and can be interpreted through semiotic analysis to determine their ideological function (10-11).

Britton's stardom, in conjunction with *Into the Sea's* liberatory narrative of women surfing in Iran, drove the crowdfunding of *Into the Sea*. But regardless of the specific reasons for how the film acquired funds, it is the economic model of crowdfunding itself that is the most compelling aspect of *Into the Sea* from an analytical perspective. Crowdfunding provides far greater levels of autonomy and independence than other forms of production (Brzozowska and Galuszka 2021). Indeed, given that political economy itself is a branch of moral philosophy, Suzanne Scott, in *New Media and Society* argues that the moral economy of crowdfunding is transformative in terms of media practices and cultural production; an idea she describes as "fan-ancing", that is, creative forms of labour financed by fans (Scott 2015). Crowdfunding is now a common mode of financing startup projects across a variety of creative and cultural industries and the subject has received a lot of academic attention in the past decade. Shneor, Zhao, and Flåten's text "Advances in Crowdfunding: Research and Practice (2020)" encapsulates the growth of these economic studies.

Just as *Into the Sea* was produced through an initial personal relationship between

Britton and Poizneau, Agrawal, Catalini, and Goldfarb note in "Some Simple Economics of Crowdfunding" (2014) that crowdfunding is often responsible for the financing of early-stage creative projects. It is also somewhat geographically localised, since this form of funding is usually predicated on personal relationships and due diligence requiring face-to-face interactions in response to high levels of risk and uncertainty (in that creators often have far more information about the funded project that those pledging funds). In the case of *Into the Sea*, crowdfunding acts as a substitute for traditional forms of funding. The film bypasses the political economy of surfing industries that have historically been driven by surfboard manufacturers and lifestyle clothing producers. Its crowdfunding also means bypasses traditional forms of funding for mainstream documentary filmmaking, whether this be funding from public service broadcasters, film production funds such as Screen Ireland, or from independent production companies. As such, the political economy of crowdfunding clearly has more autonomy and independence than industrially-driven forms of political economy.

In attempting to provide motives and definitions for this form of financing, Hossain and Oparaocha (2017, 2) note that no clear definition captures the dynamics of the phenomenon, other than that it is an increasingly popular and "radically different" form of finance from traditional interpretations of economics. The reason for this is because "for centuries, attracting outside capital to finance a project or entrepreneurial initiative has mostly depended on the conventional fund providers, such as banks, venture capitalists, government agencies, and foundations" (1). As such, crowdfunding creates funding "opportunities for non-governmental organisations, citizens' initiatives, non-formal groups and individual projects, which used to have rather limited access to this sort of resources" (Kedves 2016). Luka suggests that this creates new flows and networks (2014) which challenge and disrupt mainstream forms of cultural production. Others suggest that

crowdfunding represents a democratisation of "innovation financing" across a variety of cultural sectors which can provide a disruptive form of economy (Cordova, Dolci, Gianfrate 2015).

Mina Fanea-Ivanovici notes that crowdfunding and filmmaking appear to offer the "right match". She argues that one of the reasons for this is because in Europe in particular, "film production benefits from public financial support; however, film projects require large amounts of money to be completed and this support may prove insufficient in comparison with the actual need" (2019, 1). As a result of this disparity, and reflecting the unique production circumstances of both *Into the Sea* and *The Crest*, Fanea-Ivanovici suggests that "crowdfunding is an alternative financing method used by companies or within projects that do not have enough resources and are not eligible for traditional financing. In its early ages, crowdfunding would mainly address financing needs of those projects involving a high level of risk and uncertainty" (ibid).

Crowdfunding is now an essential component of what Chuck Tyron describes as the "ongoing evolution" of the indie film scene in the United States, which has spurred new forms of auteurism and independence in film production (2016). Tyron argues that crowdfunding creates increased levels of independent authorship in contemporary independent filmmaking. This can be seen in both *Into the Sea*, and *The Crest* and can be associated with a form of socially autonomous political economy. This growth in independent authorship is a result of novel economies that have emerged through a combination of new technological forms which challenge dominant economic models. Several important technological elements are at play in crowdfunded filmmaking, such as the role of the internet and social media, web portals, digital interactivity tools, and e-payment systems, which all form the bedrock for crowdfunding (Wieck, Bretschneider and

Leimeister 2013). As an alternative means of marketing a film, social media networks can also influence the growth, distribution and marketing of a crowd financed film based on the number and type of friends/likes/followers a film can engage with online (Hossain and Oparaocha 7). In this sense, the use of Easkey Britton as the star of *Into the Sea* aligns with the social economics of her stardom in the online surfing community. Crowdfunding allows fans and followers of online communities to fund and finance forms of cultural production in which they have an interest. The autonomous characteristics of the political economy of crowdfunded films lie in the fact that they come from donation-based funding. Donation based funding has intangible economic benefits to the fans/funders. The risk associated with donation-based crowdfunded films and documentaries is also very low, because in most cases there is no obligation for founders to provide a return, nor do the funders expect one (Fanea-Ivanovici 2019, 10).

Britton's stardom and connection to the surfing subculture and media was a major influence of the funding of *Into the Sea,* but its support for women's equal rights to participate in Iranian sport was another important factor. Ana Kedves provides evidence that human rights concerns are often used as the reasons why crowdfunded projects are successful, and shows that "rationalisation and appealing to morality are most frequently used to legitimise the social action of crowdfunding on online platforms" (2016). This tendency is something that *Into the Sea* clearly attempted to take advantage of in its crowdfunding, particularly as its online emphasis on the *Indiegogo* platform claimed that the project was not just about the production of a film, but also the Waves for Change organisation co-founded by Poizneau and Britton, which had the stated aim of using surfing as a means for increased gender equality and social change in Iran. However, this organisation no longer appears to exist, and *Indiegogo* refused my request for information on this topic, which leads to questions regarding the problems with crowdfunded projects.

Some aspects of its economy are almost untraceable, calling into question the transparency of this kind of production. Although *Into the Sea* was funded under the title "Waves of Freedom" the website for this film no longer exists and it is impossible to find out publicly how or where the funds for this project film came from, or went (Mondy 2013). This highlights another key issue around crowdfunded projects concerning the idea of intellectual property, where it is often unclear who owns the project in question (Sorenson 2015, 3).

6.5 - Crowdfunding, Diaspora, and the 'Narrative of Return' in *The Crest* (Mark Corvino 2017).

Crowdfunding also played a key role in the political economy of *The Crest,* which offered much greater transparency in its finance and production than *Into the Sea*. *The Crest* is an exogenous example of the Irish surf film genre produced in Ireland which was dependent on the online connections of the Irish diasporic community in order to acquire its finance. As previous chapters have noted, the Irish diaspora played a key role in the depiction of surfing in Ireland on film, and in the development of the genre in Ireland (the Malloy Brothers, *Step into Liquid*, *Waveriders* etc). *The Crest* takes the apparently disconnected relationships between surfing and the Irish diaspora and incongruously unites them, positioning the act of surfing on the Blasket Island by the descendants of the original emigrants as a means of cultural connection to the history of emigration on the Islands. The resulting film is easily the most striking example of the postmodern combination of surfing, homecoming, and Irish-American diasporic fantasies.[44]

[44] This 'postmodern' perspective casts surfing as an essential part of Irish heritage, but there is of course no historical relationship between surfing and Ireland until the 1960s.

Corvino's crowdfunded film is an 83-minute documentary which narrativises the story of two surfing cousins (Andrew Jacobs and Dennis Kane) from the United States who return to the Great Blasket islands in search of their heritage as direct descendants of the last King of the Island chain, Michael Ó Catháin (who emigrated to United States in the late 19th century). *The Crest* is one of the most accessible examples of Irish surf cinema; it was financed through crowdfunding on *Kickstarter.com*, screened at the Dingle film festival in 2013 and at festivals in the United States, and is now available to stream on Amazon prime and was also released on DVD. Importantly, *The Crest* is another example of social autonomy in the political economy of the Irish surf film genre.

Like *Into the Sea*, *The Crest* highlights that crowdfunded film projects often emerge from personal or familial ties. Unlike *Into the Sea*, the producers of *The Crest* situated their request for funding within a wholly transparent reward based system of crowdfunding. A request for funding for *The Crest* was placed on *Kickstarter* in 2013 by Irish-American John Kane Jr. *The Crest* would eventually have 254 backers who pledged a total sum of $31, 870 to fund the project which came with the tagline, "Two descendants of an Irish king journey to the island he once presided over -- not to reclaim the land, but to surf the waves" (Kane n.d.). The funding period for the film lasted for 60 days between April 5th 2013 and June 4th 2013, and the producers of *The Crest* employed an innovative use of reward-based crowdfunding in order to incentivise funding. Donors to *The Crest* would receive rewards for specific donation amounts. For example:

- For $5, donors would receive 'eternal thanks and your name listed on our website as a contributor to the film (30 backers)
- For $20, donors received the same as the previous option, with 3 custom made *The Crest* stickers (16 backers)
- For $30 dollars, donors would receive all of the above plus a HD digital download of the completed film (47 backers)

- For $50 dollars, donors received the above plus a DVD copy of the finished film (38 backers)
- For $65 dollars, donors received the above plus a The Crest T-shirt designed by the ‘stars’ (sic) of the film (11 backers)
- For $75 dollars, the above plus and acknowledgement in the end credits.
- For $90 dollars, the above plus a signed DVD copy
- For $135 dollars, a signed print of Andrew Jacobs art inspired by the film (17 backers)
- $ 265: the above plus an invitation to the film premiere, a password to access a digital diary of the making of the film, and a personalized postcard sent from the crew (3)
- $365: the above plus 3 hours of surfing lessons with DK Kane in the San Diego area (travel not included) (3 backers)
- $525: An original piece of art by Andrew Jacob and your name etched on a plaque to be donated to the Blasket Centre in County Kerry (5 backers)
- $1000: The above (minus surfing lessons) and a credit as an associate producer on the film (6 backers)
- $2150: The above plus a custom-made surfboard used in the film (0 backers) - $5000: The above plus a credit as an executive producer on the film (1 backer) (Kickstarter 2024).

When the *Kickstarter* campaign was complete, John Kane also made it possible for backers to offer supplementary donations directly via Paypal, following a 2013 *Irish Times* article that piqued interest in the subject of the proposed documentary (Quinn 2013). Any funding that came from Irish backers prior to this national exposure was minimal. Only 5 of the overall Kickstarter backers came from Ireland, whilst 225 came from the United States. Of these American backers, 16 came from Boston, Massachusetts, and 9 from Burlington, Vermont, (both cities with significant Irish heritage) (Kickstarter 2013). Highlighting the importance of localised social ties to crowdfunding, in the final days before the Kickstarter campaign closed, Kane family member and producer Laura Kane enthusiastically wrote on the website:

> C'mon everyone, less than 5k to make the goal, send this link to all your friends, family, colleagues, any Irish person you know, people who like documentaries, film buffs, surfers, anyone who knows Dennis Kane or Andrew Jacob, the list goes only. Less than three days to go, let's get it done. Going to be an awesome film just based on the stories they came back with (Kane 2024).

The Crest coincided with a visit to Ireland in 2013 by the extended Kane family, many of whom were involved in the production of the film; Corvino also shot the film in the same year. This visit deliberately coincided with Fáilte Ireland's *The Gathering,* a year-long tourism event aimed at enticing people with Irish American roots to indulge the fantasy of return to Ireland. Negra and O'Leary describe *The Gathering* as rooted in the "performativity of national hospitality" in which the "theme of elective return became centralized in the relationship between Ireland and diaspora" (2016, 134). They also describe *The Gathering* as a "plea for financial support", highlighting that the event was worth 170 million Euro to the Irish economy, and increased the number of overseas visitors to Ireland by 7.3% in 2013 (133). Interestingly, other Irish-American crowdfunded films were produced about the Blasket Islands (and Ireland) in the same year, also seemingly influenced by *The Gathering*, such as *Isle of My Youth* which was also utilised Kickstarter as a platform (Simon Francis Hambrook 2013).

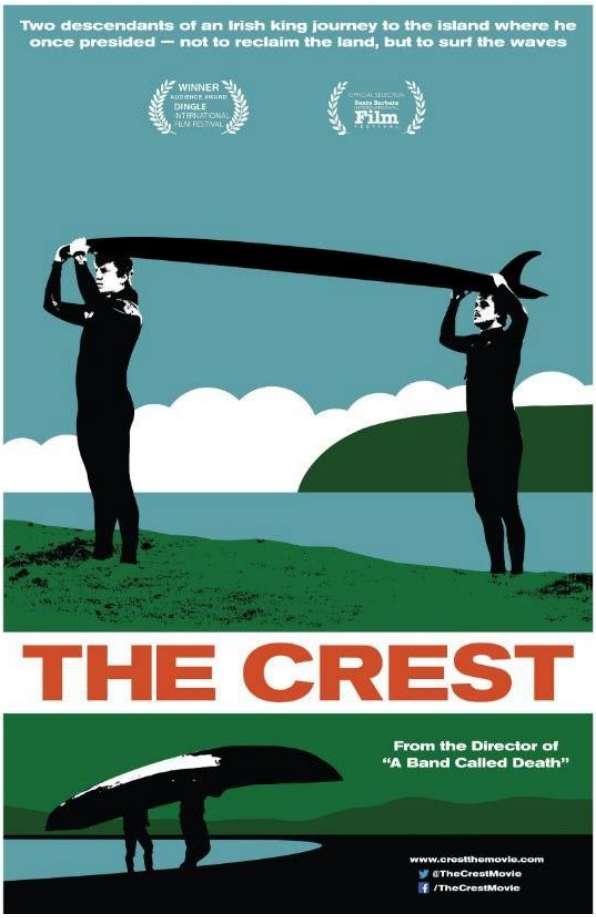

Figure 29: The Crest illustrates the blurred boundaries between amateur and professional filmmaking in surf filmmaking.

The Crest begins with the story of how surfers Andrew Jacobs, from Cape Cod, and his cousin Dennis "DK" Kane (a surfboard shaper), from Florida, were brought together while searching for their genealogy online. Whilst researching their family history, the pair realized that their distant relation was the last king of the Blasket Islands, who died in 1929. *The Crest* weaves this contemporary story of surfing Irish-Americans with the emigration story of the Blasket Islands in west Kerry (whilst also telling the tale of their great great grandfather's fiddle, which was left behind when he emigrated to the United States and later found in a bistro in Dingle). Jacobs and Kane are spurred on by their uncle, Jack Kane Senior, who plays a prominent role in the film. Jack Kane Sr., a passionate Irish-American and successful businessman, suggested the entire family travel

to Ireland to coincide with the year of *The Gathering*, which was also the year of his 60th birthday. Jack Kane and Eliza Kane also served as producers of the film, again highlighting the importance of familial relationships that often lie at the centre of crowdfunded ventures.

The narrative follows the extended family holiday to Ireland, where the surfers and the wider family engage in a fact-finding historical journey into their family heritage. *The Crest* makes a distinct effort to provide historical accuracy, highlighting local and academic literature on the subject and providing interviews with local historians at the Blasket centre in Dunquin. It also interviews academics such as Dr. Tadgh O'Dushlain from NUI Maynooth who argues that the Blaskets "became a mecca for nationalist sentiment" due to their treatment by successive British and Irish governments. The family attends a book launch by the oldest living Great Blasket Islander, Michael Carney and this is followed by another scene recounting the importance of the Irish language and culture on the islands, which remained "unspoilt" by modernization; itself a romantic idea given the hardships of the original population. The tenuous connection between surfing and Irish heritage in the documentary is fleshed out by history of the islands and their culture, the role of music, fishing, the forced rehousing of the population on the mainland, and the development of distinctive Naomhóg boats.

Although central to the premise of the narrative, very little surfing of consequence actually takes place, although the young surfers act as the conduit through which the film conveys historical information about the Islands. Jacobs and Kane occasionally punctuate the reverie with statements such as "I just wanna frikkin surf already man", and, once, during the culmination of the film on Great Blasket Island and looking through the window of an abandoned home of an ancestor towards the sea, "He could look out and just see

barrels".[45] Conn Holohan has analysed the fantasy of return to abandoned and derelict cottages in Irish cinematic images – also noted in *Litmus* – as a means to imagine the landscapes of Irish cultural nationalism. He cites Catherine Nash, who notes the "power of the cottage to function as an indexical expression of cultural ideals as 'the realization, both in the physical fabric of the landscape and in the moral and spiritual domain, of the ideal form of Irish society'" (Holohan 2015, 14; Nash 1993, 49). This motif is a common generic convention in Irish surf films.

In the final sequence, Jacobs and Kane make their way to Great Blasket when the weather finally allows the local ferry to travel. They briefly surf at the local beach after Jacobs, an artist, paints his board with Celtic knots and whorls. In the homecoming narrative of *The Crest*, the incongruous act of surfing at the site of their former ancestors allows the fantasy to complete itself. "It definitely feels like home in Ireland" states Jacobs, yet it is somewhat of an exaggeration when he says that the "parallels between us and the people of the Blaskets are way more similar than we could ever have predicted". Whilst the men are clearly touched by the moment of return, the films enactment of lifestyle tourism on the Island as a means to reconnect with the lives of their emigrant ancestors is jarring.

[45] 'Barrels' being slang for good waves.

Figure 30: The postmodern entanglement between Irish identity and surfing in The Crest represents a form of heritage confusion.

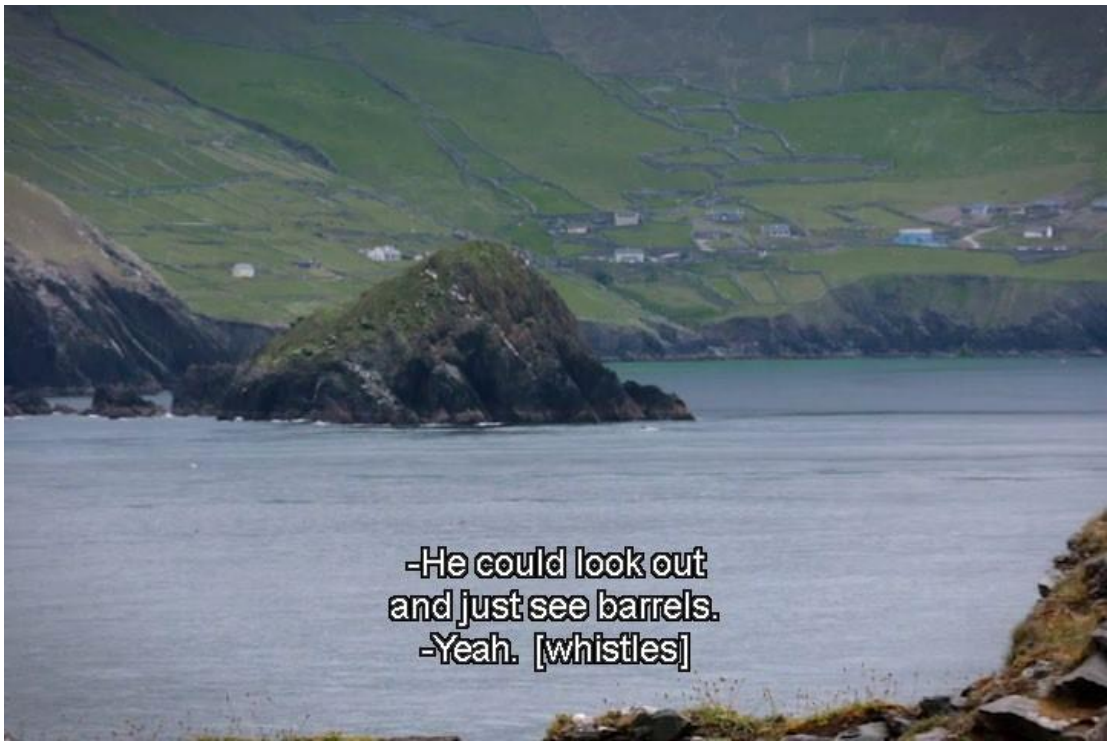

Figure 31: The protagonists of the The Crest reimagining their ancestor's priorities.

O'Leary and Negra argue that the greatest achievement of *The Gathering* was for the Irish political establishment "to switch the focus from the 50,000 Irish people leaving the country that year to the 270,000 Irish people who were returning – albeit on holidays"

(2016, 127). They highlight that in an Irish context, 'narratives of return' have come to dominate representations of Irish emigration, but that these narratives "have been shaped to fit with official narratives of a business-friendly nation in recovery" (133). The authors predominantly focus on the 'return' of recent Irish immigrants and *The Crest* can be regarded as filmic example of what O'Leary and Negra describe as user generated viral Irish "homecoming videos" (ibid). As a crowdfunded family driven production, it shares many of the same tendencies and goals that the authors describe, albeit flavoured by the distinct nuances of Irish-American cultural identity. Of these 'homecoming' videos, they state that:

> While early versions of the videos were more amateurish in style, as the genre has grown Irish homecoming videos have become increasingly professional to the point that they can no longer be viewed as shared private family moments but are increasingly shaped as aspirationally viral entertainment texts (136).

The authors also state that these videos are "devoid of any political or social commentary on the necessity of departure", yet whilst *The Crest* is seemingly oblivious to the political and social realities of Ireland in 2013, it is hard to associate it with the cynicism of the then Taoiseach Enda Kenny's neoliberal Ireland, even if the film acts as a marketing 'freebie' to Fáilte Ireland. The film doesn't ignore the realities of the hardships of previous generations of Irish emigrants. Corvino's film emphasises the harsh realities of the Blasket emigrants and their melancholy in leaving their home, whilst also emphasising the successes of later generations of Irish-American family members who followed them. *The Crest* is part search for heritage, part surf movie and part-tourism advertisement and a remarkable exchange between contemporary Irish-America, surfing, lifestyle tourism, and the Irish emigrant story.

Yet as Gary Quinn noted in *The Irish Times*, "this is no twee Irish-American romance" (2013)**.** The film is real story about the spread of two Irish American families throughout the United states and an example of their successes and willingness to maintain cultural and economic relationships with Ireland. A recent survey by *The Irish Times* showed that this willingness for Irish-Americans to "buy in to their 'Irishness'" continues (McGarry 2013). Patsy McGarry wrote that "the big finding is that Irish Americans, despite being many generations removed from Ireland, continue to be attracted to their Irish heritage because of Irish history and culture, and the positive perceptions of Irish identity in the US" (ibid). At its core, the film documents an Irish-American family which is incredibly proud of its cultural heritage and happy to partake in the events of *The Gathering* without regarding them as being exploitative. Romanticism is present, but the documentary is ultimately a poignant reminder of the realities of the Irish American cultural experience, while also being a postmodern reconstruction of heritage in which the ancient Polynesian activity of surfing becomes part of the Irish historical narrative.

Writing in 2010, Martin McLoone argued that in contemporary representations, "the west of Ireland exists as a kind of ideal regenerative environment for the troubled and worried mind of modernity" (133), and this wider tendency towards the idea of "regenerative" return can be seen in *The Crest*, and other Irish surf films in which the diaspora plays a major role. However, the emigrant nostalgia present in *Litmus, Thicker Than Water, Waveriders* and *The Crest* is not specifically a product of Celtic Tiger (or post Celtic Tiger) Ireland, but rather a long-lasting historical trope in visual media wherein Ireland is cast as premodern arcadia based on a diasporic understanding of the island. A key narrative convention in this fantasy is the reverential return. Often this is accentuated for what have been termed "ancillary" customers of Irishness (Casey 2002, 2006), and this

can be observed in the films *Litmus* and *Thicker Than Water*, however in some cases, such as *The Crest*, it is aimed directly at the Irish-American community.

In her 2013 book, *Other Peoples Diasporas*, Sinead Moynihan interrogates contemporary relationships and understandings between Irish and Irish-American identity. In her central thesis Moynihan poses a question formulated by sociologist Steve Garner: "What happens when other people's diasporas converge on the homeland of a diasporic people?". Moynihan contends that "(re)imagining Irish diasporic experience in the United States in various ways…became absolutely central to representations of multicultural Ireland during the Celtic tiger years" (3). It can be argued that surf films are part of this reimagining, and that the Irishness displayed in the surf films analysed in this chapter represent free floating signifiers of multicultural and transnational Irishness that exists in parallel to formulations of Irish cultural identity generated within Ireland. And the answer to Garners question is that, in *The Crest* at least, the diaspora's "intense feeling for place" (Holohan 14) (re)imagines Ireland as a site of postmodern leisure tourism. Irish-American fantasies of return do not always have to be regarded with cynicism, because every so often the fantasies are grounded in reality, and they include surfing.

6.6 - Conclusion: Autonomous Production and Crowdfunded Documentaries

This chapter analysed the production and distribution of two crowdfunded Irish surf films, highlighting how both films relied on grassroots and community support to secure financing. It also highlighted the important role that video hosting sites would play in the development of this alternative economic model. The chapter demonstrates how the political economy of crowdfunded films often blurs the line between community, amateur driven productions and entrepreneurial media practices, which is markedly different to publicly funded and commercially driven models of media production. The next chapter will further this position by focusing on the most common form of Irish surf film production, the short films known as edits.

Clearly, in the case of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest*, crowdfunding played a decisive role in allowing their respective filmmakers and producers (Poizneau, Britton, the Kane family) to take a financially autonomous route to the production of each film. Both films would have had great difficulty in acquiring funding from 'traditional' sources such as public television funding or public film funding. Due to the high amount of risk associated with both films and the lack of any major profits, private funding from production companies would also have been unlikely. It would therefore appear that crowdfunding offers a positive challenge to industrial forms of production within a capitalist (and non-capitalist) economic system. However, some authors have questioned the revolutionary capacity of this form of finance.

In "Go Crowdfund Yourself! Some unintended consequences of crowdfunding for documentary film and industry in the UK" (2015), Inge Ejbye Sorenson analyses the consequences of this new form of film financing in order to understand the industrial and socio-economic implications of crowdfunding for existing and established industries and economies (4). Sorenson agrees that "in principle, using crowdfunding to support any creative endeavors that would otherwise struggle to come to fruition can only enrich cultural expressions across the world", a point that could clearly be expressed regarding a film such as *Into the Sea* (ibid). She also notes that documentaries often have much lower

budgets than fiction productions, and that crowdfunding should see an increase in independent documentary production in a time of declining film budgets; this has certainly been the case in the last decade. As in the case of *Into the Sea*, Sorenson highlights that crowdfunders for documentaries are more likely to favour high profile, issue led films and polemical documentaries (ibid). Also reflecting the conditions of the production of *Into the Sea* in Iran, Sorenson notes that crowdfunding has become a vital funding avenue in totalitarian regimes and countries where funding is generally not available for non-conformist topics (5-6). However, rather than representing a break with the past, Sorenson argues that crowdfunding actually benefits and feeds into established funding and distribution models. She argues that:

> Film festivals, distributors and broadcasters gain and profit the most from such a system. Rather than providing an alternative to existing production and distribution structures, crowdfunding more often than not feeds into, supports and enforces traditional production and distribution paradigms and hierarchies (ibid).

Sorenson's point is that many films that were initially crowdfunded end up in mainstream forms of distribution. This increases their reach and audience numbers by being screened in festivals or by broadcasters (she argues that being screened on a major broadcaster such as the BBC still provides more social capital than being displayed on YouTube (6) but sees a negative effect on the industrial production of documentaries, as broadcasters now have a "pool of crowdfunded and premade documentaries at their disposal" (9). The acquisition of these films is also risk free. This offers less curatorial potential, as commissioning editors have less editorial influence. For Sorenson, crowdfunded films a problematic because they are under no obligation to follow notions of 'balance', 'impartiality', and 'objectivity' which have been safeguarded by the television networks' producer guidelines and codes of conduct when producing for the television networks such as the BBC and Channel 4 (10). she states that an unintended outcome of

crowdfunding is the potential for the erosion of professional standards as well as working conditions for journalists, filmmakers and crew within the documentary film industry, and that crowdfunding could undermine the integrity and credibility of documentary filmmaking. Sorenson also argues that whilst crowdfunding is hyped as democratizing the means of production, it could well have the reverse effect (Sorenson 2015, 11). Sorenson believes that crowdfunded films may distort the cultural economy of documentary filmmaking to such an extent that it's perceived success may impact already declining public funding in the cultural economy. She argues that:

> In cultural economics it has long been acknowledged that artists subsidize the arts with their time, free work and self-funding of the development of projects. Artists also subsidize each other by helping out colleagues, collaborators and prospective employers as part of their practice. 'Freebies' is an established term within creative work, and although not always recognized as such in economic terms, artists subsidize each other. However, with crowdfunding, so do the artist's families, friends and fans. Before simply extolling the wonders of crowdfunding as public arts funding, we need to ask ourselves how this funding form impacts not only on existing industries and funding structures but also on the arts and artists. To what extend is crowdfunding supplementing or distorting existing cultural and creative industries? Is crowdfunding a genuine addition and benefit to the arts and public funding, or is it simply artists and their networks swapping money, whilst public funding for cultural industries declines and arts funding falls? (12).

Whilst Sorenson's perspectives have great validity, they frame crowdfunding as a problematic development for film financing, rather than regarding the practice as an innovative and egalitarian alternative to dominant economic systems of production in both capitalist and non-capitalist societies. Sorenson misses the extent to which the economics and technological dynamics of crowdfunding allow the public at large to actively engage in what is professional film production. Her belief that crowdfunded films would only serve to benefit mainstream systems of exhibition and distribution or "traditional production and distribution paradigms and hierarchies" (4) has simply not been the case. Films such as *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* were screened at minor and niche film festivals rather than the

dominant nodes in the festival chain. Contemporary models of streaming as distribution also means that the producers of crowdfunded texts are not subject to the whims of industrial institutions when attempting to monetise their films.

For example, the films described in this chapter are available to rent and stream on the Amazon streaming service (*Into the Sea* can be rented for $2.99 and *The Crest* rented for $3.99) which provides filmmakers with 50% of the revenue of all buy/rent sales (Jones 2017). Both films were also released on other platforms, such as *Vimeo*, where they can also generate revenue directly to filmmakers and producers. In the last 15 years, the emergence of video hosting platforms such as *Vimeo* have created economies that directly benefit the producers of crowdfunded films. Crowdfunded films are representative iterations of contemporary screen media consumption, where phones, tablets and laptops exist alongside smart televisions and digital cinemas, encouraging a vast democratisation of the production and consumption process.

Both films analysed in this chapter can be understood as Irish surf films for the purpose of categorisation; one based on the starring role of an Irish celebrity surfer who drove the films economy, and the other based on its setting, location, and diasporic means of financing. But it is equally true to say that both films are also representative of an economy that is postnational, because crowdfunding represents a postnational economic framework wherein iterations of the national, and the transnational, become obscured (because films can be produced without any interactions between 'national' industries). Both *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* are examples of an economic system that provides a challenge to mainstream forms of screen production, exhibition and distribution. Crowdfunded documentaries offer the possibility of a challenge not just to dominant forms of economy, but also to dominant ideological dynamics in the subject matter and content

of film and television production. This is particularly true of *Into the Sea*, where surf cinema was until recently based on a predominantly masculine political economy, driven by the relationship between male surfers and industrial producers. Crowdfunding allowed Poizneau and Britton to make a completely independent feminist surf film which, although driven by the common narrative theme of 'the search', is also a successful societal critique of a masculine political and religious regime. Crowdfunding in both *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* is an ultimately empowering phenomenon, providing the filmmakers with the social and economic autonomy to produce texts resonating with symbolic meaning for their eclectic online audiences.

Chapter 7 - Creative Labour in the Political Economy of the Short Irish Surf Film

7.1 - Introduction – Creative Leisure, Creating Labour

As the culmination of the theoretical discussion that began in chapter one, this chapter analyses the unique, varied, and evolving economies underpinning the most common form of Irish surf film: the short films known as edits. It argues that these films emerged from a confluence of technological developments and the growing interdependence between online video platforms and independent creators. This dynamic has given rise to a mode of media production and labour that is largely autonomous, operating outside the structures of mainstream film production in Ireland.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the short films also known as "edits" are the clearest example of a generic form to emerge in Irish surf filmmaking. This chapter analyses the political economy of these short films with a focus on *Dark Side of the Lens* (Mickey Smith, 2010), *Run to the Sea* (Dylan Stott 2013), *A Lunar Cycle* (Andrew Kaineder/Easkey Britton 2018), and *Ebb and Flow* (Alice Rosaline Ward 2019). The chapter will emphasise that these films have become the central commodity in the market economy of Irish surf films. The chapter will analyse these films alongside many examples of the wider genre, employing a Veblenian approach to the evolution of this economy by providing a socio-historical background to the form in order to analyse its political economy (Stilwell 2014, 212-219).

This chapter addresses key questions such as - who produces short Irish surf films? How are they exhibited? Where does their finance and funding come from? What kind of labour exists in this form of production? What forms of capital influence how commodities function within this economy and what determines their value? If the films are profitable, where do profits come from, whom do the profits benefit? The chapter will show that whilst short Irish surf films are a commodity in a small subcultural community, their form is also linked to a dominant form of industrial exhibition on video hosting platforms within

the wider platform economy (Chalaby 2023). It will ask whether labour exploitation occurs in this relationship. For example, do short Irish surf films serve as a form of user generated content with video hosting platforms the primary economic beneficiaries? Or, should this form of filmmaking be regarded as a form of creative labour based in leisure, with little economic gain for producers and exhibitors alike?

Short Irish surf films are embedded in the technological transformation of global screen industries over the last 15 years. This form of filmmaking has been fostered by relatively affordable and now widespread technologies including the DSLR camera, action cameras such as the GoPro, aerial drone cameras, waterproof camera housings, alongside rapid leaps in internet adoption**.** This has resulted highly skilled "craft-based" (Dwyer 2015, 988-1004; 2019, 1) forms of creative practice which blur the lines leisure and labour, and between amateur and professional. Although the form is predominantly exhibited online, it is also linked to a surf film festival culture in Ireland and internationally, almost all of which feature short film competitions, further encouraging the production of films in the genre. This chapter will show how social, cultural, and economic capital all intermingle in the political economy of short Irish surf films and how their autonomous, vernacular form is problematic for the dominant interpretations of political economy described in chapter one.

The next section will introduce the short Irish surf film in greater detail. The chapter will then provide examples of different economic models in the genre, firstly by examining two films which had no funding (*Dark Side of the Lens*, *Run to the Sea*). Following this, it will analyse the political economy of commercially funded short Irish surf films, with *A Lunar Cycle* serving as a case study. Finally, it will focus on *Ebb and Flow*, a publicly funded feminist short surf film which utilised on demand services on

Vimeo in order to recoup costs. The chapter will show that beyond economic models the political economy of this genre is characterised by its distinct archetypes, its aesthetics tendencies, and its performativity, all of which are rooted in a youth driven, leisure-orientated, community-based form of filmmaking.

7.2 - Introducing the Short Irish Surf film

Short Irish surf films known as "edits" are short indigenous surf films that are usually, but not always, between 3 and 15 minutes long.[46] Whilst eclectic in form and content, they can nevertheless be defined as a genre. Some short Irish surf films have been screened locally in cinemas and at film festivals, but they are predominately exhibited on video hosting platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube and consumed by audiences on devices such as mobiles phones, tablets, laptops, and smart televisions. They are shared widely by fans, surfers, and filmmakers, on a host of social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook. Rather than pre-planned narratives, edits are usually composed of hours of digital footage in which actions on camera are rarely directed, but filmed as raw documentary footage of unpredictable events. For this reason, their creators often credit themselves as editors, rather than directors, as the film is created in the edit, rather than in a pre-planned form (however this is not a strict rule). This footage is filmed and distributed

[46] Short films known as 'edits' are a common aesthetic tendency in the culture of online video, existing on both social media platforms such as TikTok, and Instagram and a vast variety of online video hosting platforms; an industry that generated 228 billion dollars in the USA in 2023. Regardless of their pervasive presence, contemporary online 'edits' remain mostly unexamined by either film or media theorists, perhaps due to what Groening regards as inherent biases within the academic community regarding the aesthetics of online video when compared to industrial forms of film or media production (Groening: 2016?). The concept of 'editing' has been more thoroughly examined with regard to film and television studies (Crittenden: 1996, Orpen: 2003, Morales-Morante: 2017, Frierson: 2018, Greenberg: 2018, Dancyger: 2019, Dziadosz: 2020), but Kolstrup notes that theorists have rarely attempted to properly define the term (1998: 31-33). It is however commonly accepted that editing, or 'montage', is a key aspect of the cinematic medium providing it with an obvious imprint of the artists hand and 'a tangibly creative and formative process' (Arnheim, 1971: 87-88).

for the costs of a digital camera (with a water housing), a drone, and a laptop, then edited into a form which is easily consumable online via mobile phones, tablets and laptops. This ability to shoot vast amounts of high definition content for almost no cost has enabled the rise of the video edit in all forms of online content, as well as Irish surf edits. Irish surf edits also display formal characteristics that are dependent on their means of production and exhibition. The form is connected to the economics of video hosting and social media platforms and this has influenced factors such as the length of the films themselves. For example, the average length of online video on platforms such as YouTube is 11.7 minutes (Statista 2014). Since 2010 (and before in some cases) Irish surfers, photographers, videographers and filmmakers, have produced over 150 short Irish surf films. The genre includes a wide variety of films, including *Of Viking Minds* (Chris Case 2016), Kev L. Smith's *Le Chéile* (2019) and *Winter Glow* (winner of the 2015 London surf film festival,), Andrew Kaineder's *Mar*, *Beyond the Noise*, and *A Lunar Cycle*, Peter Clyne's *Inside Out* (2013), *North of Nowhere* (2013), *Oceanic Acid* (2014), and *Threading Edges* (2015), and Clem McInerney's *Amygdala* (2024) and *Hounds of the Storm* (2024). These shorts range from professionally produced films (made by photographers and videographers working in surfing industries), to independently produced films, Avant Garde films (not always 'independent'), commercial films (emanating from both large scale and cottage surfing industries), amateur films, poetic films, environmental films, and feminist films (both commercial and independent).

This form of filmmaking is directly related to the lineage of subcultural surf films produced by Bud Browne (and others) in the 1950s. Booth and Ormrod describe these subcultural films as "pure" surf films; that is films made within and predominantly for the subculture, which represent the same levels of subcultural authenticity as Browne's did 75 years ago. Browne's films were usually shot over the course of a winter surfing season.

Footage was then edited together and packaged with a catchy title or theme. Like short Irish surf films, these films were marked by an innovative alternative means of cinematic distribution. Browne's early films were screened in schools, local halls, and makeshift auditoriums in the early 1950s. These tendencies are echoed in contemporary Irish surf edits, which are often edited together from footage filmed over the course of a winter surfing season before being screened at surf clubs, regional cinemas, festivals, or on websites. Short Irish surf films are marked by their distinct vernacular aesthetic, which set them apart from expositional mainstream surfing documentaries, industrially produced narrative films about surfing, or international surfing edits.

This chapter utilises documentary studies scholar Keith Beattie's concept of "radical delirium" (2005) as a means to describe the dominant aesthetic trope in the political economy of the short Irish surf film. This creative trope characterises how the films generate forms of social economic and cultural capital in their subcultural economy; the films must constantly attempt to represent the phenomenological experience of the 'stoke' in order to gain social, cultural, or economic capital[47]. It also highlights that edits should not be regarded as sober examples of the documentary form, but rather as performative examples of creative nonfiction. This concept will be further explored in an analysis of Andrew Kaineder's *A Lunar Cycle*, which will show that this performative creativity is linked to conspicuous forms of consumption associated with the subcultural politics of the surfing community. Beattie has argued that 'the primitivist stylistics of independently produced non-fiction surf videos are largely intelligible through reference to the textual practices of varieties of "underground film and video" (Beattie: 2005: 334). Whilst short Irish surf films continue these underground aesthetics, they are now rarely

[47] "Stoke" is a surf slang expression denoting excitement and pleasure (Warshaw n.d.).

primitivist, and the chapter will analyse the way surf edits have become professional practice for filmmakers such as Kev L. Smith, Clem McInerney, and Alice Rosaline Ward.

At the core of the analysis in this chapter is the question of agency and autonomy in cultural production and this concept will be explored with regard to all of the films in this chapter. It will argue that video platforms such as Vimeo correspond to David Weinberger's idea of a "meta-business" (2007), which he describes as a "category of business that enhances the value of information developed elsewhere and thus benefits the original creators of that information" (2007). Weinburger includes iTunes as an example of a system which profits the creators of music without bearing the same costs of discovery, production, and marketing that record labels had to. In other words, music, films and other forms of popular consumption are "more searchable, more findable, more usable" (225). This ultimately allows short Irish surf films to be autonomous in their forms of production, distribution, and exhibition. Short Irish surf films demonstrate similar autonomy to the crowdfunded films analysed in the previous chapter, which makes them representative of novel and evolving economies which offer problematic challenges to the "strong" political economy approach described in chapter one. To challenge these interpretations "requires a theoretical explanation of the role of production knowledge which goes beyond portraying media producers as either cogs in a mass production machine or unwitting proponents of a dominant ideology" (Dwyer 2019).

Figure 32: A still from Peter Clyne's Oceanic Acid featuring night surfing below the Milky Way. Clyne's work is representative of the technical proficiency of many Irish surf filmmakers.

7.3 - Genre and Archetype in the Political Economy of *Dark Side of the Lens*

This section analyses the emergence of short Irish surf films through its most archetypal film and the role of video platforms in its distribution. The analysis focuses on Mickey Smith's *Dark Side of the Lens,* which quickly became the generic, aesthetic, and economic archetype within short Irish surf filmmaking. The analysis situates the film as a commodity within a community based subcultural market, for whom the film provides social 'value', but it will also show that the film is a commodity in the wider economy of video platforms**.** The section emphasises that the work of creative artists such as Mickey Smith is representative of Paul Dwyer's theory of craft-based media production, which provides an alternative to problematic aspects of theoretical political economy of media (Dwyer 2015).

When *Dark Side of the Lens* was released on the Vimeo platform in 2010, it represented a turning point in how surf films were produced, consumed, and exhibited both in Ireland, and internationally. Although it was not the first online release of an Irish surf

film, *Dark Side of the Lens* represented a watershed between the economies of surf films of the 1990s and early 2000s, which were still primarily based in physical media, and those of the era of online video hosting platforms, which emerged in the early to mid-2000s (Vimeo was founded in 2004). Smith's film remains technologically and aesthetically relevant 15 years after its online release. Released in the same year as the *Waking Maeve* (discussed in a previous chapter), *Dark Side of the Lens* was radically different in its cinematic visual aesthetic and its mode of exhibition and distribution. *Waking Maeve* was distributed on locally produced DVD's sold through surf shops, and its audience was intentionally and necessarily local. Its 'graphics on screen' aesthetic was also a Taylor Hawkins-esque mimic of the visual aesthetics of 1990s surf films. Its runtime was 30 minutes. In contrast, *Dark Side of the Lens* is 6 minutes long, reflecting a form that was already influenced within by the average length of videos on video hosting platforms.

Dark Side of the Lens was characterised by its availability to stream for free online to a local and potentially global audience on the Vimeo platform. In its use of small high definition digital cameras and water-based photography, Smith's film reflects a subcultural filmmaking economy characterised by accessible editing technologies, and online forms of post-production and distribution. Once limited to professional producers, access to professional filmmaking technologies enabled amateur and professional surf filmmakers and videographers to create technically advanced productions with a cinematic aesthetic for a fraction of the cost of a mainstream industrial production. Some films, such as *Children of the Norn* and *No Boarders* (Meldrew Productions), would continue to be released in the 2010s on the DVD format through subcultural channels, such as surf shops, However, as a result of viral online forms of exhibition and distribution, surf shops lost their role as the primary distributors of subcultural surf films to the platform economy.

Interestingly, the physical space of the cinema did not lose out in this relationship. There are now regular screenings of Irish surf films in cinemas released through a network of local film screenings and film festivals.

The film's visual iconography framed Ireland as a cold, inhospitable, wild paradise, and was extremely influential on subsequent films in the genre, as were its novel modes of exhibition and distribution. *Dark Side of the Lens* became the major influence on the structural generic elements of Irish surf films in its symbolic images, sounds and situations which consisted of a collection of filmed images of from Smith's winters spent at and around the Cliffs of Moher. The ephemeral, quickly edited images include waves filmed within waves, dolphins rising from the sea, raindrops falling on the ocean surface, Smith being surrounded by a flock of birds, whilst images of the film projected onto non-coastal locations provide the film with a dreamlike, Avant Garde quality. These euphoric images were juxtaposed with Smith's poetic narration which reflects on his career as a surf photographer and videographer, as his self-composed soundtrack builds to a crescendo. Whilst a small portion of the film features images of surfing and bodyboarding, Smith provides a focus on events seen outside of his role as a surfing cameraman. Smith returned to the subject of surfing on the west coast of Ireland in other film collaborations with Allan Wilson. *Tommerline* (2016) is a more prosaic exposition of the surfer Tom Gillespie, whilst the 5minute-long *Coming Up For Air* was sponsored by Finisterre. This film is clearly an attempt to capture the murky darkness of an Irish winter to an even greater extent than his previous films, with the aesthetic featuring a colour palette of grainy dark tones. *Hunros Jorna*, not filmed in Ireland, continues this legacy, arguably pushing further into the experimental.

Surf cinematography historically placed emphasis on the vibrant colours of warm water surf locations. In Smith's film, Ireland is a cold, wet, dark, harsh, environment. The archetypes which were established by *Dark Side of the Lens* included:

- atmospheric and brooding cold water seascapes
- an introspective mood and soundtrack
- an emphasis on Ireland's wild coastlines, rugged landscapes, and cliff scenery
- Images perceived to relate to Irish heritage, such as castles, ruins, and single-story cottages.
- A romantic focus on the individual vs. the elements, emphasising the isolation of the surfer and similar in tone to Caspar David Friedrich's romantic 1818 painting 'Wanderer above a Sea of Fog'.
- Constant reference to winter motifs, and emphasis on winter light (the contrast between the darkness and light of short winter days)
- Surfing in Ireland as a meditative escape from society.

These signifiers gradually became iconic in the genre, becoming part of the establishment of a stable framework of signs which can be both "repeatedly produced on the one hand and read and understood on the other by the generic community" (Neale, 75-76). Within these repeated aesthetic and ideological tendencies, Ireland is represented with the same hard primitivist tropes that Luke Gibbons describes in 19th century romantic travelogues to the West of Ireland (1988, 194-220). This is a constant presence in a lineage of Irish themed literature, film and arts. For example, in literature, the West of Ireland in depicted and imagined in the same way in Sidney Owenson's 1806 novel, *The Wild Irish Girl,* and in film this can be seen in Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934). *Dark Side of the Lens* continues a mythic narrative established in *Litmus* that imagines Ireland as a final frontier of surfing; a vast empty wilderness of waves, with mostly empty line-ups amidst what are perceived to be unsullied landscapes. As the chapter on subcultural politics describes, Ireland is imagined as a place of escape from civilization, 'beyond the noise' of the industrial world (as described in chapter two). Recurrent winter motifs that emphasise

the cold, harsh conditions are again reflective of this hard primitivist romanticism, given that surfers and filmmakers are not forced into the activity, and do so as a form of leisure.

Smith's Avant Garde approach is part of the legacy of countercultural surf filmmaking pioneered by Alby Falzon in *Morning of the Earth*, which is a formally and technically inventive aesthetic also pursued by Andrew Kidman in *Litmus*. Beattie identifies clear associations with Avant Garde filmmaking movements in the surf film, noting that "the term avant-garde is used here to refer to experimental or innovative filmic styles and formal practices" (Beattie 334). The influence of *Dark Side of the Lens'* decentered approach to surf filmmaking, which focuses on landscape, place, and space as much if not more than the act of surfing itself, has become pervasive in short Irish surf films. This aesthetic and ideological connection to the Avant Garde can be directly attributed to the filmmaking philosophy of American new wave independent film director, Jonas Mekas. Mekas' filmmaking was highly influential on *Morning of the Earth*, which in turn was a direct influence on Kidman's *Litmus*. As described in a previous chapter, *Litmus* then had a seminal influence on the visual representation of Ireland in surf cinema. *Morning of the Earth* deliberately linked itself to the alternative approaches of the New American Cinema by opening with a Mekas quotation that states "we are the measure of all things. And the beauty of our creation, of our art, is proportional to the beauty of ourselves, of our souls". Beyond the influence of the New American Cinema, Falzon's film was influenced in a wider sense by "a lineage of poetic and imagistic Avant Garde documentary film" (Beattie: 338). *Dark Side of the Lens* also shares an ideological perspective with *Morning of the Earth* and *Litmus* and this has become a common thematic element in short Irish surf films. Beattie notes that "surf texts and Avant Garde works, and their overlaps and intersections, can be contextualized within a common rhetoric of anti-traditionalism which derived much of its force from its connections to 1960s counter-

cultural ideology" (Beattie 2005, 334). This heritage provides generic themes that run through short Irish surf films, such as an emphasis on personal freedom, hedonism, exalted shots of nature, a shared distrust of industrial technology and its effects, and allusions to a lost pastoral ideal.

Dark Side of the Lens significantly shaped the economic development of the genre in the following decade. Surf movies historically maintained their own unique, and often ad hoc, systems of film financing and costs associated production, exhibition, and distribution. The free form of online exhibition that Vimeo provided to Smith's film removed any costs associated with exhibition and distribution, which allows creative artists to share their work more widely than ever before and increasing their potential audience (if not necessarily gaining more economic capital). From the perspective of economic theory, *Dark Side of the Lens* was a successful commodity within a small subcultural market economy, which then served as the progenitor of many similar commodities. A commodity is typically defined as a basic good that is interchangeable with other goods of the same type and is often used as an input in the production of other goods or services. Its key characteristics include its fungibility (interchangeability), its capacity to become standardised, and its ability to be traded on markets. If something has low economic value, this does not disqualify it from being a commodity, especially if the market for the commodity places greater value in social or cultural capital, rather than economic. If a commodity becomes successful within a given market, the characteristics which provide it with success are copied via standardised and interchangeable elements (in the case of films, this can relate to structural aspects such as length, aesthetics, themes, soundtrack, mode of exhibition etc). The virality of *Dark Side of the Lens* meant that its mode of distribution quickly became an archetypal commodity in the developing economy of short Irish surf films. *Dark Side of the Lens* was shared widely online. Exact viewing figures are

unavailable from Vimeo, however a contemporary aggregate of the top 6 search results on YouTube only results in over 100,000 views. The film's virality was influenced by being screened on BBC's natural history series Springwatch in 2011, but also because the film was shared online by global surfing publications.

The film also poses a challenge to theoretical applications of the political economy of media. *Dark Side of the Lens* exemplifies a form of creative cultural production that blurs the boundaries between labour and leisure, as well as the distinction between the amateur and professional. Although it was circulated and distributed by online surfing magazines and websites, the film was not financed by surfing industries. Given that films such as *Dark Side of the Lens* generate little to no economic capital to their creators, or to the industries that share them online, is must be asked what value they have as commodities, and for whom? In the absence of revenue generation as a reason for the production of the film, it is clear that the film offered social and cultural capital within the surfing subculture to its creators.

To answer this question, it is useful to consider how the concept is defined in political economy. In the labour theory of value, Marx differentiates between use value – the utility a product provides - and exchange value - the worth it holds in trade (Stilwell 115-124). All societies must create both essential and non-essential goods. Each has its own use value, but that use value is determined by who consumes it (115).[48] There are also commodities created specifically for exchange value entailing "the production of goods and services made for exchange rather than solely personal consumption" (ibid). In film culture, an example of this would be the relative difference in use and exchange value

[48] In his text *Political Economy: The Contest of Economic Ideas*, Australian political economist Frank Stillwell actually provides a surfing related example in order to understand the subjectivity of use value: 'you may not want a surfboard. But I do' (115).

between an amateur produced home movie which has no value in economic capital, and a film produced for a mass audience, where profit generation is nearly always relevant. What then determines the value of commodities within the market for short Irish surf films? The historical view of economists was that the greater the labour needed to make a commodity, the higher the value of that commodity (116). However, the labour involved in producing short Irish surf films is deeply connected to creative forms of leisure. This means that the commodities are based in a youthful, community-based form of subcultural filmmaking. This community is the primary group for whom commodities such as *Dark Side of the Lens* surf films hold social value.

Outside the small-scale economies of Irish and British surfing industries and their associated communities, *Dark Side of the Lens* circulates in the large-scale economy of video hosting platforms, for whom value should be understood differently. For all its praised auteur based cinematic aesthetics, *Dark Side of the Lens* is also influenced by the industrial mechanics of video hosting platforms in its length, form and structure. Video platforms are emblematic of the digital economy, becoming prevalent because they are "are particularly well-adapted to the novel ways in which value can be created and captured under the new technological circumstances" (Chalaby 2023, 552-571; Gawer 2022, 110). Chalaby argues that streaming platforms are defined by a business model which rests on video monetisation, which is described as "platform capitalism" (554). *Dark Side of the Lens* can be regarded as a form of user generated content within this system, although the business model provided by Vimeo offers far greater autonomy to its creators than the platforms that Chalaby examines. This relationship will be analysed to a greater extent in the last section of the chapter. However, it should be noted that online forms of film distribution through video hosting platforms were of great benefit to *Dark*

Side of the Lens, as it reached a far higher audience than it could have through solely subcultural channels, with no limits imposed on its creative production.[49]

Smith's film became archetypal in the political economy of the 'edit' in its visual aesthetics, themes, mythic narratives of the west of Ireland, and in its utilisation of video hosting platforms as a means of exhibition and distribution. The nominal economic profits and free social value of many surf edits are explored in the next section in relation to Dylan Stott's *Run to the Sea*, which also explores the aesthetic concept of radical delirium and its importance within the political economy of this genre.

Figure 33: Images projected onto a wall in Dark Side of Lens which help to provide the film with an abstract quality emphasises the delineation between the urban and rural worlds.

[49] As noted earlier, this audience has resulted in over 100.000 views on YouTube alone, which was not the initial hosting platform.

Figure 34: Dreamlike imagery in Dark Side of the Lens.

7.4 - Radical Delirium and Creative Labour in Dylan Stotts *Run to the Sea* (Ireland, 2014)

Dylan Stott's *Run to the Sea* was also produced with no financial aid as an artistic passion project, blending a punkish 'do it yourself' aesthetic with surf filmmaking. *Run to the Sea* and *Dark Side of the Lens* were both produced without a production budget. However, a key distinction between the two is that unlike Smith, Stott was not a professional videographer, filmmaker, or editor. Like *Dark Side of the Lens*, Stott's film represents the same cinematic lineage which melds "documentary and experimental stylistics and practices in an expressive and innovative non-fictional form" (Beattie 2001, 333). Stott's film displays a key aesthetic which dominates the overall political economy of the short Irish surf film, which is what Beattie describes as the tendency towards "radical delirium" (335). This aesthetic shifts the short Irish surf film away from conventional interpretations of the documentary and instead towards a form of

performative creative non-fiction. This section will further articulate that leisure and lifestyle are the underlying motivations behind the creative labour to produce these commodities.

In order to explain the zero-budget economy of *Run to the Sea*, a brief explanation of the filmmaker's creative labour is necessary. Dylan Stott is a New York born surfer who is particularly known for his relationship with big wave surfing at Mullaghmore in County Sligo, and as a pioneer of the offshore wave known as 'Prowlers' (Miller 2019). Stott studied creative writing at University College Dublin and is regarded as one of the finest literary documentarians of Irish surf culture (Stott 2024). His highly expressive surf literature has been published in subcultural publications such as *Surfline*, *The Inertia*, and *Carve Magazine*. Despite being a key figure in Irish big wave surfing, Stott's full-time profession is as an English teacher in County Sligo. Stott's literary creativity pervades his approach to short surf filmmaking. His relationship with surf filmmaking began with three shorts, *Room With a View* (2011), *A-Sides* (2012), and *Trendy New Atrocity* (2013). Each film was shot on DSLR and GoPro cameras, and are reflective of what Beattie describes as the primitivist aesthetics of the surf film. Although clearly amateur in production, these films were highly ambitious attempts to convey the filmmaker's deeply personal phenomenological experience of surfing during an Irish winter. They were also reflective of the same tendency towards "radical delirium" that charcterises the subcultural surf film. The films were released on the Vimeo and YouTube platforms and their length reflected this mode of consumption. *A-Sides* was 7 minutes and 14 seconds long, whilst *Trendy New Atrocity* was 8 minutes and 11 seconds long. The absence of formal opening and closing credits in *A-Sides* contributes to its amateur aesthetic. *Trendy New Atrocity* does provide production credits which provided an insight into the community based collaborative element in this form of short film. The film was produced utilising footage shot by a

variety of amateur, semi-professional, and professional surfers and videographers, such as Christian McLeod, Ben Skinner, Sebastian Muller, Peter Flemming, Dave Mottershead, Conor Conlon and James Skerrit.[50] Both films were produced with no financial aid, although Stott does provide thanks to the makers of the equipment utilised in the film. Stott's central role within the subculture can also be seen in his starring role (alongside Easkey Britton) in Orla Walsh's short work of narrative fiction *Riders to the Sea*(2013), which was funded by the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland).[57] Although not a "pure" surf film, *Riders to the Sea* is the sole example of short Irish surf film based in a fictional narrative storytelling and it is clearly influenced by the emergence of the short Irish surf film in the preceding years (its water photography was also shot by Mickey Smith). Stott also appeared in the biographical surf film *Lets Be Frank* (2016) and produced the 3 ½ minute short film *Shaka Status* in 2017. He has since worked with emerging Irish surf filmmaker Chris Case on a film titled *Martial Narrative* (2018).

Run to the Sea (2014) was produced with Kurt Rist and won the 2014 Shore Shots Surf Film Festival award for best Irish short film, highlighting the embryonic relationship between subcultural lifestyle-based film festivals and the short surf film. The film was also screened at the San Sebastien international film festival in 2014. The 'do it yourself' vernacular aesthetic of Stott's previous films is evident in *Run to the Sea*, although this film is more technically proficient. Running at 11 and a half minutes long and featuring Rist, Ben Skinner, and Paul O'Kane, the opening of *Run to the Sea* is an intelligent and reflective ode to surfing during an Irish winter on the biggest swells. Stott employs art, poetry and music to provide an interpretation of his experience, opening the film with the

[50] Both Mickey Smith and James Skerritt were judges on the 2024 Irish Surf Film Festival short film panel. [57] The film's title is a reference to a tragic play by J.M. Synge set in the Aran Islands. It was published in 1903 and first performed in 1904.

image of a cross emblazoned with the words “not caution, but rather a wise blindness” (a quotation by the American writer and scholar Norman O. Brown).

Figure 35: Still from Stott's Run to the Sea.

This is quickly followed by the recitation of a poem by the German born American poet Charles Bukowski titled “The Laughing Heart”, originally recorded by Tom Waits for the 2003 documentary film, *Bukowski: Born Into This*. For Stott, the poem is evidently a life affirming reflective interpretation of his own life choices spent living and surfing in the coldwater environments of North West Ireland:

your life is your life don’t let it be
clubbed into dank submission. be on the
watch. there are ways out. there is light
somewhere.

it may not be much light but it beats the
darkness. be on the watch. the gods will
offer you chances. know them. take
them.

you can't beat death but you can
beat death in life, sometimes. and
the more often you learn to do it,
the more light there will be.
your life is your life.
know it while you
have it. you are
marvellous, the gods
wait to delight in you.

Bukowski's poem also serves as an entrance point to the aesthetic of radical delirium, around which the rest of the film is structured. Stott's camera does linger on local sights such as the surrounding landscapes, but unlike *Dark Side of the Lens*, which has an off-centre approach to the physical act of surfing, Stott's film reflects a more traditional approach to surf filmmaking, featuring a stream of images of surfers tackling big waves set to a musical soundtrack. Stott uses two songs by Nina Simone ("Sinnerman" and "Feel Good") to provide the film with a jazz-like aesthetic quality infused by its editing.

Run to the Sea was highly innovative in its production techniques, and Stott shot much of the film on a GoPro action camera. This is particularly evocative during a 25 second slow-motion point-of-view sequence which is an homage to George Greenough's "Echoes" sequence in Falzon and Elfick's *Crystal Voyager* (1973). There is a striking big wave sequence at Mullaghmore, shot from a boat in the water, as well as underwater sequences and sequences shot from the shore. The production technologies that allowed for this level of technical variation provided Stott and other semi-professional and amateur filmmakers with a level of artistic and creative autonomy that was once only achievable by the financial clout of industrial filmmaking; only 6 years previously Joel Conroy had used

expensive 35mm film to shoot the same wave at Mullaghmore, financed by the Irish Film Board, and at a far higher cost. *Run to the Sea* again highlights the collaborative community within this form of short filmmaking. The film was partially filmed in collaboration with videographers Peter Clyne, Fionn Rogers, Mikee Corker, Christian McLeod and CMP Media (Conor Conlon), all of whom have produced short Irish surf films (and feature films). Given the frequency of collaboration within this genre, it is evident that the short Irish surf film genre represents a fluidly evolving film movement.

Stott's film is again in the cinematic lineage of *Morning of the Earth*, rather than the line of expositional surf documentaries such as *The Endless Summer*. Central to this aesthetic, which is the driving force in the political economy of short Irish surf films, is that that whilst surf films are documentaries, they are unconcerned with "truth or knowledge claims" (Beattie: 335), whilst nevertheless asserting that the events they present "occurred in the actual world" (335). Beattie argues that independent surf films have a structuring aesthetic that can be described as a "discourse of delirium, which is informed within an emphasis on spectacle" (2001, 336). This represents a mix of the expressive, poetic, and rhetorical aspects of documentary with a structural emphasis on the poetic, and an excessive use of style. (335336)[51]. Beattie connects this interpretation of radical delirium with 'pure' surf films, which display a lack of concern with historical events and the removal of direct causalities and motivations (this perfectly aligns with early YouTube's emphasis on spectacle over causality). *Dark Side of the Lens* and *Run to the Sea* are both influenced by this emphasis on delirious spectacle which resulting in an often-experimental engagement with film form. One of the primary reasons creative labour exists in this form of cultural production is from a desire of surf filmmakers to recreate this

[51] Beattie's concept of 'the discourse of delirium' emerges from the work of Bill Nichols in his analysis of the film *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (Nichols 1996).

sense of "radical delirium" (an aesthetic attempt to recreate what surfers what was previously described as the "stoke"). The terminology is relative but this is no different from the desire of any artist in any cultural field that attempts to creatively recreate personal form of experience.

In *Run to the Sea* this "delirium" is recreated through its use of poetry, image, and soundtrack, set within the visual spectacle of surfing of big waves. For Beattie, spectacle in the surf film is based on providing a promiscuous visual surplus – "a feast for the eyes" - and is viewed "not for knowledge but sensation" (336). This is enhanced by music and soundtrack, rather than sober narration, where visual and aural elements contribute to a form of documentation based on sensory experience (ibid). Beattie specifically highlights the aforementioned "Echoes" sequence from *Crystal Voyager* as an indicative aesthetic example, in which Pink Floyd play over images of Greenough surfing a tube from within. *Run to the Sea* pays deliberate homage to this scene and attempts to recreate the "wild, flailing hysteria" of "pure delirium" (ibid) by juxtaposing the rising crescendo of Nina Simone's "Sinnerman" with equally intense sequences of surfers riding waves at Mullaghmore. Stott's use of Bukowski's *The Laughing Heart* in the opening minutes - a poem about living a meaningful life despite the inevitability of death - is another example of an attempt to convey an emotive response to the act of surfing, rather than an analytical approach to the events of the film.

The blurred lines between amateur and professional filmmaking in *Run to the Sea* is characterised by the technology of the GoPro, which Stott utilises throughout. The GoPro was founded on the basis of providing non-professional surfers with the same capacity to shoot and record in water as professional videographers. Such technologies offer greater social autonomy to their users by allowing both amateur and professional

filmmakers greater freedom to creatively produce. Stott was also able to distribute his films to a global online audience based in the subcultural community of surfing through video hosting platforms which have allowed such amateur forms of filmmaking to proliferate with success. These socially autonomous forms of production and distribution have led to an explosion of amateur content. However, this shift to online exhibition and distribution also introduces new dynamics and potential inequalities, which will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

As highlighted throughout this chapter, *Run to the Sea* is an example of a film in which labour is based in leisure. The film was not sponsored by any firm within the surfing industries. Stott is not dependent financially on these industries and his filmmaking and writing are supplementary passions which are considered authentic precisely because of their independence.[52] With no budget, and no viable economic capital to be gained from the distribution of his films, Stott's work is based in artistic expression in which the acquisition of social and cultural capital is a form of value that outweighs financial gains. This form of political economy is common in Irish surf filmmaking and this reality can clearly be seen in many of the edits screened at Irish surf film festivals since their inception.

The next section will explore the opposite form of political economy to the *Run to the Sea* and *Dark Side of the Lens*. It will examine the close associations between short Irish surf films and commercial sponsors, which is a key historical tendency in the genre. It will show that whilst commercial sponsorship as a means of financing short Irish films is common, many filmmakers retain their artistic autonomy in aesthetics and distribution. It

[52] The tendency to revere what is perceived to be 'authentic' is described in the chapter on subcultural politics.

will also show that commercially sponsored surf films represent an autonomous industrial form of filmmaking.

Figure 36: spectacle driven amateur filmmaking enabled by action camera technologies such as the GoPro. Point of view photography in Run to the Sea.

7.5 - From Creative Leisure to Commerce: Industry Sponsorship and the Short Irish Surf Film in *A Lunar Cycle* (Andrew Kaineder 2018)

The most common form of funding for the short Irish surf films stems from commercial sponsorship. As chapter two described, the relationship between surfing industries and film finance has been intertwined since the late 1950s, initially through the promotion of surfboard producers and surf shops. By the 1990s, the genre was dominated by the commercial sponsorship of major international brands such as *Ripcurl*, exemplified by a series of films known under the moniker of "The Search" throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Surfing industries play a significant structural role in the political economy of this genre.

Stephen Neale articulates the role of industry in the creation and perpetuation of Hollywood genre filmmaking, and this can also be applied to the role of sponsorship and industry finance in the short Irish surf film genre:

> When linked to the fact of economic pressures towards the maximization of capital assets, and to the concomitant forms of production organization these pressures give rise to, the economic importance of genre becomes evident: genres serve as basic and 'convenient' units for the calculation of investment and profit, and as basic and 'convenient' categories in which to organize capital assets so as to ensure that their capacity will be utilized to the maximum. Economic factors can therefore be seen to exert a pressure which results not perhaps in the creation of genres as such, but rather in their perpetuation as the basic form that the industry's products take (78).

As the market for surf films gradually moved away from the historical dependencies on cinema and video distribution, this relationship has become more complex. Surf films no longer solely emanate from the major professional surfing countries such as the USA or Australia, and major surfing industries are not always the financiers of contemporary surf films. The genre has grown to such an extent that commercially funded surf films – partially financed by a range of both large and small sponsors - now exist in many locations, such as Morocco, Iceland, Norway, and Russia (amongst an array of others). This section analyses this relationship in the context of short Irish surf films with a case study of the role of British surfing lifestyle brand, Finisterre, in the production of Andrew Kaineder's short film, *A Lunar Cycle*, starring Easkey Britton. This film was released on the Vimeo platform in 2018, and won best short film at the 2018 Shore Shots film festival.

Douglas Booth (2017, 313-240) has argued that the political economy of surfing industries and their relationship with filmmaking is concerned solely with revenue generation for major brands, stating that its economy is purely based in a…

> quest for accumulation by the owners of the means of production (capitalists) who seek to extract maximum surplus value from those who own only their labour power (workers); and competition between capitalists who, in their attempts to accumulate capital, continually engage new technologies and new ways of organizing and controlling labour (319).

Booth's approach is firmly based in the analysis of the historically dominant surf cultures of the USA, but notes that the gradual fragmentation of surfing industries has caused major structural differences to emerge, noting that these new companies will be "sleeker, more evasive…able to hop across genres...and have less interest in dominating surf culture" (335).

Irish surf films are a niche subcultural form of filmmaking with its own subcultural politics within an already niche market, where sponsorship can emerge from a variety of sources. Sponsorship can emerge from major companies with an interest in promoting their brand, such as Red Bull (*Hounds of the Storm*) or Monster Energy (*Over the Ledge).* It can also emerge from major professional surfing industries such as wetsuit or lifestyle manufacturers like C-Skins, which sponsored Kev L Smiths *Le Chéile,* or Billabong, who sponsored Peter Clyne's *Oceanic Acid* (2014), a visually stunning film which features surfing under the milky way through time lapse photography.

However, in many cases, the industries which sponsor short Irish surf films are local companies, such as surf shops, or small businesses such as Sligo based Waxon handmade surf boards, who sponsored *Murk* (Peter Clyne 2014). In addition, commercial sponsorship should not be regarded as compromising the independence of or the aesthetic form of short Irish surf films, many of which retain experimental qualities; this can be seen in Mickey Smith's short film *Coming Up for Air* (2014), sponsored by Finisterre. Commercially sponsored films represent a spectrum of film types, from prosaic

productions focusing on a single professional surfer, to complex, innovative films produced by artists with a passion for their craft and who have turned that craft into a profession. Sponsored films should not be understood as having less social or cultural value amongst the subcultural community. Although they may provide companies with revenue, they are still screened in competition at surf and lifestyle film festivals and regarded as "pure" iterations of the genre.[53] Sponsored surf films stem from the historical relationship between photographers and professional surfers in the culture of surfing magazines in the 1960s (such as Kevin Naughton and Greg Peters), to the era of video in the 1990s and early 2000s, when professional surfers were regularly accompanied by videographers (Engle 2015). This form of labour is driven by the relationship between professional surfers and surfing industries, providing surfers and photographers/filmmakers with work that allows them to continue their lifestyle.

In Ireland, this has resulted in a contemporary industry of localised highly skilled "craft based" cultural producers which has grown since the late 2000s and early 2010s, including professional photographers, videographers and filmmakers. These craft producers document almost every major surf session on the west coast of Ireland in professional videos that appear almost immediately on social media. They are almost always produced by individuals connected to the lifestyle subculture in Ireland rather than production companies, which is the norm in mainstream screen production. All of the films are released online, and all of the sponsored films discussed in this section have been screened at both Irish and international film festivals. Two examples of highly skilled craft-based production workers who have produced acclaimed commercial and independent short Irish surf films are Clem McInerney and Kev L. Smith. County Clare

[53] These definitions are explored in chapter 3, on the subcultural politics of Irish surf films.

based Smith is the brother of Irish surfer Fergal Smith (no relation to Mickey Smith, although his films are a clear influence), for whom personal passion became a form of professional production.[54] His work is released through his Vimeo page and website and he describes his title as "Drone Pilot, Cameraman, Director of Photography (DP), Documentary Filmmaker" (Smith n.d.). His films include *Le Chéile* (2017) – screened at the Portuguese Surf Film Festival, the Maine Outdoor Film Festival, the Florida Surf Film Festival, and the Mountain and Adventure Film Festival), *Winter Glow* (2015) – winner of best short film at the London Film Festival), and *Taobh le Taobh* (2019), a non-surfing related film which "investigates the artistic process of visual artist Matthew Mitchell and his exploration of texture, surface and topography in the Burren, County Clare" (Smith n.d.). Smith played a major role in the production of Ross Whitaker's feature film *Between Land and Sea* (2017), analysed in chapter five.

Clem McInerney is also a key figure in the visual representation of surfing in Ireland. His recent short independent film *Amygdala* (2022) was described as a "small passion project" (McInerney 2022), but he has also directed and produced films for Red Bull such as *My Last Two Winters* (2024) and *The Hounds of the Storm* (2024), both featuring professional surfer Conor Maguire. Highlighting the technical capacities of professional surf filmmakers, McInerney states on his professional showreel that he shoots from "Land, Sea & Air", utilsing a Sony FX6 interchangeable lens camera & Salty water housing, a Z Cam E2 M4 cinema camera & Salty Water Housing, a Sony A7RV & Aquatech water housing, and Mavic 3 prone drone (McInerney n.d.). McInerney has worked for productions sponsored by Ripcurl, Monster, Vans, Xcel Wetsuits, and the Lahinch Surf Experience (amongst others), and with Ireland's best-known professional surfer Gearoid

[54] Fergal Smith has appeared in numerous edits (*Any Epic Day, Winter, We Are Nowhere and its Now).* He also worked with his brother on an online web series titled *Growing*

McDaid on *Misery Loves Company* (2018) and *Over the Ledge* (2020). Smith and McInerney's work is based in a form of leisure which became professionalised in the creative labour of the professional surfing videographer.

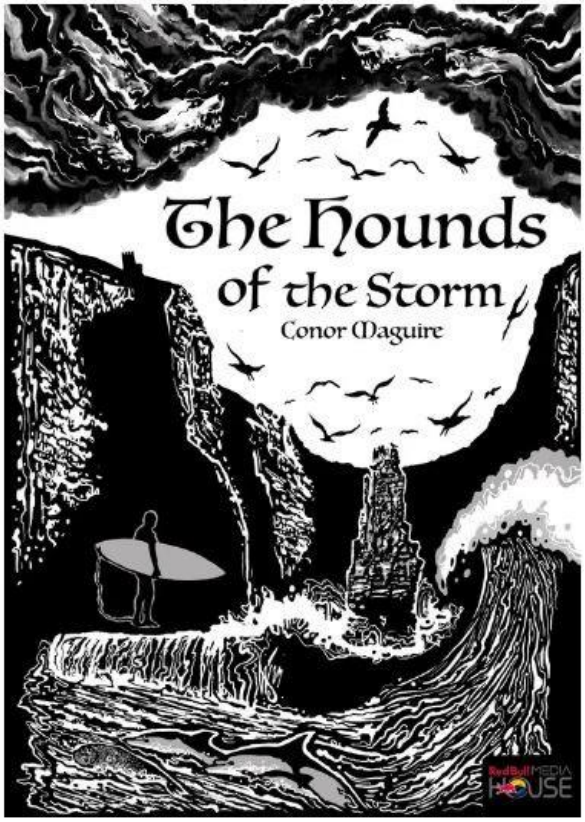

Figure 37: Hounds of the Storm poster (2024).

7.6 - Commercial Sponsorship and Avant Garde Feminism in *A Lunar Cycle*

One of the most widely seen examples of the commercial form is Australian filmmaker Andrew Kaineder's *A Lunar Cycle*, which was sponsored by the British lifestyle clothing brand Finisterre; a company which has been a major sponsor of Irish and British surf films and film festivals since the early 2010s. Finisterre are highly regarded within the subculture for their recognition of surfing's problematic ecological footprint (they produce recycled wetsuits) and the company is certified as a B-Corp company by B-lab (a global nonprofit organization) which measures the social and environmental impacts of

companies requiring companies to meet sustainability targets and high levels of transparency in production (B Corporation n.d.). *A Lunar Cycle* was widely promoted online by surf industry websites and non-surfing websites, including Joe.ie which claimed that the film was "stunningly shot and the combination of the beautiful images and the arresting themes will captivate many beyond the surfing community" (2018). The film featured the Finisterre brand ambassador, Easkey Britton which highlights the close link between industrial production and stardom in the genre. *A Lunar Cycle* is also indicative of the strange relationship between industrial capitalism and the experimental/Avant Garde tendencies which remain in many commercially sponsored short Irish surf films. The film constantly features evidence of the Finisterre brand (during the production credits at the beginning and end of the film, on an image of Britton's surfboard, her wetsuit and clothing) but it also remains alternative and experimental in its aesthetics. This is a strategy – like that of lifestyle brand Patagonia - which allows Finisterre to appear 'authentic' to their lifestyle-based consumers whilst also potentially appealing to wider consumers and online audiences.

In a highly masculine genre, which featured very little explorations of women in surfing, *A Lunar Cycle* is an experimental feminist treatise on women's bodies and female surfers' relationship with the sea. The film was released on the Vimeo platform and is 5 minutes and 15 seconds long, shot in the same monochromatic palette as Kaineder's longer film, *Beyond the Noise* (see chapter two). On its release, it was described by Finisterre as an attempt to fuse "cold water surfing, dance & poetry" in which "Easkey Britton explores a synodic month from a female perspective" (Finisterre 2018) (a synodic month is also called a lunation, representing the period across a month wherein the Moon goes through all of its phases). Britton both appears in and narrates the film, fusing her spiritual relationship with the sea and the moon with the physical changes a woman's body

undergoes each month. Her narration consists of a personally written abstract poem emphasising the “ebb and flow” of womens’ bodies and the tidal power of the moon on the ocean. Her analogy further elucidates the relationship between her menstrual cycle and the act of surfing during a cold Irish winter when she states that “colours bleed into each other, through the fissures and the fractures”. This narration is juxtaposed with imagery of Britton as a sole female surfer battling the winter swells of Ireland’s rugged north west coast; a romantic and iconic archetypal image in short Irish surf films.

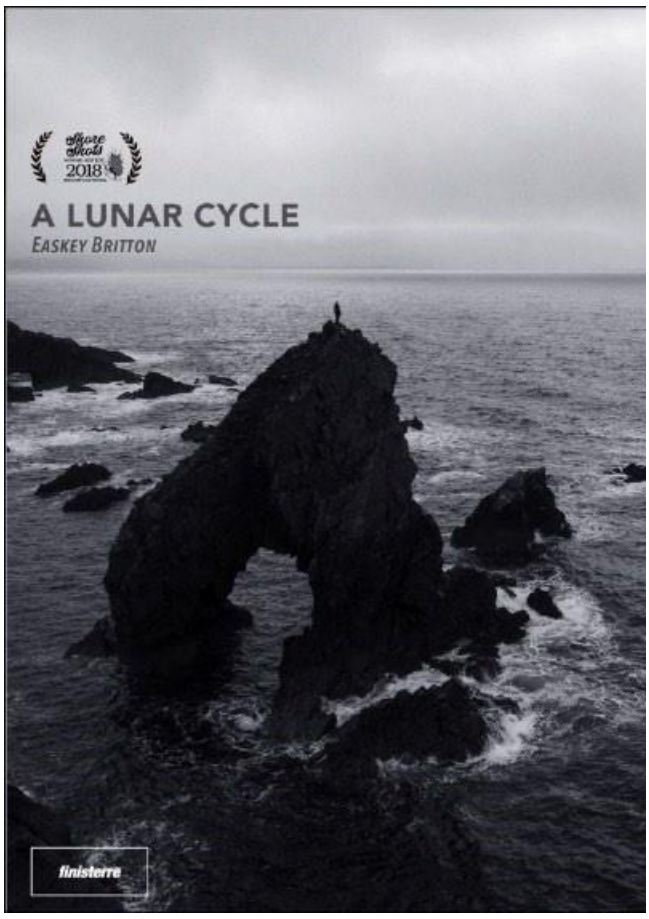

Figure 38: Hard primitivism in the poster for A Lunar Cycle.

A Lunar Cycle is a performative documentary and a form of creative non-fiction in which its star is a performative commodity. But is also a highly autonomous form of cultural production which blends experimental filmmaking and feminism. Like all the

examples in this chapter, its autonomy stems from its total disconnection from mainstream forms of industrial film production, exhibition, and distribution. It is also autonomous in its content and form which reflects the agency of the artists which created the film. which is reflected in its Avant Garde tone. Even though *A Lunar Cycle* is funded by a commercial sponsor, its experimental tone is part of the same aesthetic lineage that runs through films such as *Morning of the Earth, Litmus,* and *Dark Side of the Lens*.

Economic capital is obviously important to professional surfers and lifestyle brands, but there is little expectation that films such *A Lunar Cycle* will directly generate revenue. As noted throughout this thesis, there is a social nature to the production and consumption within this genre which is directly representative of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, and Pierre Bourdieu's social understanding of capital (Triggs, 2001). From this perspective, the "production of goods and services is not treated as a technical puzzle involving the selection of the least-cost combination of factors of production and a profit maximizing output" (Stilwell 2014, 216). Surfers, videographers, filmmakers, and brands can enhance their position within the subcultural community through what are perceived by the subculture to be authentic forms of cultural production. The political economy of commercially sponsored surf edits is enabled by highly skilled craft workers, often working on each other's films as part of a collaborative, communal enterprise.[55] This is a form of labour based in leisure and lifestyle rather than large scale industrial labour, wherein any economic capital earned allows those involved to perpetuate their lifestyle. In this sense, surf filmmakers should be regarded as artists following artistic

[55] Example: Clem McInerney provided footage for *A Lunar Cycle* and Alice Rosaline Ward's *Ebb and Flow*, amongst other films. 63 The archetypal example of this is Mickey Smith's *Dark Side of the Lens*, which was not sponsored by surf industries but has been streamed over 100,000 times on YouTube alone. However, *A Lunar Cycle* has currently only achieved 1.2 K views on the Finisterre YouTube channel.

practice within a creative subcultural economy, regardless of whether their films are sponsored or not.[63] The next section will describe another economic model in the distribution of short Irish surf films and show how the independent filmmakers such as Alice Rosaline Ward have utilised online platforms to monetise her artistic practice.

Figure 39: Drone photography of the Grianan of Aileach (a hillfort in County Donegal) in A Lunar Cycle. Kidman's film utilises the location to blend Celtic mysticism and spirituality with contemporary feminism.

Figure 40: Easkey Britton film dancing in a reflection in A Lunar Cycle.

7.7 - Feminism, Creative Labour, and Commerce in the Political Economy of *Ebb and Flow* (Alice Rosaline Ward, 2019)

The final economic model in this chapter is the least common, in which artists recoup costs through on-demand video services such as Vimeo-On-Demand and Amazon Prime Video. One of the most interesting creative professionals to emerge in this form of cultural production is Alice Rosaline Ward, who has utilised this innovative mode of finance since 2019 to monetise her films. Ward is originally from Dublin and studied Multimedia at DCU before moving to Sligo in 2016. She has directed five surf films: *Ebb and Flow* (2019), *Otherland* (2022), *Oishii* (2023), which premiered at the Irish surf film festival in Galway 2023, *Rhythms* (2024), and her most recent film *Salt* (2024), a winner at the London Surf Film Festival in November 2024 (Seapea Films n.d.). Ward has also produced small amounts of independent work for Irish brands such as Magee, the charity Liquid Therapy, and the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland. Ward is an auteur whose films are expressive and reflective feminist interpretations of her surfing life and her relationship with the sea, whilst also adhering to the tendencies of radical delirium, creative non-fiction, and the generic archetypes described earlier in this chapter. Her work remains Avant Garde and experimental in tone, but rather than making her films available for free on video hosting platforms, Ward has funded her artistic practice by monetising her films through direct-to-consumer models of transactional video on demand services. Like the other examples in the chapter, Ward's labour is independent and directly associated with a desire to maintain leisure and lifestyle.

Produced entirely by women, *Ebb and Flow* stands out as one of the most imaginative and resourceful recent short Irish surf films and a watershed feminist text in the genre. Ward was inspired by the lack of female representation in the genre, noting that "I was always looking up films and videos and there was nothing really on female surfers

in Ireland…so I really thought I was such a niche but when I went to Sligo I found so many women in the water". *Ebb and Flow* was produced by Ward's own production company, Seapea Films, and by producer Mairead Collins. The film focuses both directly and indirectly on the lives of three Irish surfing women, Elizabeth Clyne (an Architect), Katie McAnena (a well-known surfer and windsurfer, also a Doctor), and Shauna Ward, a marketing coordinator.

Subtitled *Ebb and Flow: Women in the Atlantic*, Wards film emphasises her artistic perception of the union between women and the ocean. The films markedly innovative opening scene begins with an animated sequence provided by Alice Maher – leading Irish contemporary artist - which overlays upon an aerial image of a whitewater seascape, shot by drone.[56] These deliberately simplistic animations resemble a form of naïve art, possessing a raw, unpolished quality which bookends the beginning and end of the film. This features the transformation of a seal into a woman, then two women, before changing to a mermaid and swimming woman whose hair twists in Celtic knots and whorls. This is described by Ward as bringing "the Irish folklore tales of selkies to life on the screen" thereby "adding further depth and dimension to the work" (Seapea Films n.d.). The film then moves to archetypal, incidental, ephemeral imagery of things seen by Ward in her role as an in-water camera operator, moving between imagery of underwater seascapes, the landscapes of the north west, and the natural world, whilst featuring its three protagonists surfing on a variety of crafts, such as Stand up paddle, windsurf, and surfboards. The film alternates between non-narrative based creative non-fiction before jarringly cutting to face-

[56] Maher is an award-winning artist, video artist, animator, and writer. See https://alicemaher.com/ (Accessed 25/11/24)

on interviews with its participants after 4 minutes, before splitting back to its more experimental form after almost 8 minutes.

The soundtrack links space and place with by music by Sligo based singer songwriter Jessie Solange Whitehead who provides a version of The Gloaming's *Samradh Samradh*. The lyrics of another track by the 3-piece Sligo based female band The Hunter titled "Why Don't I Work" effectively highlights the connection between surf films and youth-based leisure; "Why don't I work like the other men do / How the hell can I work if the sky is so blue / Springtime has come and won't we have fun / We'll give up our jobs and we'll go on the run".

In keeping with the genre, *Ebb and Flow* features many surfing sequences, including a particularly heavy sequence of McAnena surfing a 15-foot swell at Mullaghmore. Collaboration and community are also central to *Ebb and Flow* in the same way as other films described in this chapter; drone photography was provided by Clem McInerney with extra footage by Giles Carey (director of *Wet Dreams* and *Dry Reality*). Ward's website describes the film as shining "a spotlight on the creative community in County Sligo", and her production company emphasises this, stating that "the collaboration extends beyond the lens, involving local musicians, graphic designers, and artists. This approach is a pivotal aspect of Sea Pea Films, reflecting the director's belief in the synergies created by diverse artistic voices" (Seapea Films n.d.).

Uniquely for a short Irish surf edit, *Ebb and Flow* was supported by two sources of public funding. The first was the Creative Ireland programme, which ran from 2017 – 2022, before becoming a body known simply as Creative Ireland (Heritage Council n.d.). This programme had a stated mission "to develop a wide understanding of the vital contribution that our heritage makes to our social, environmental & economic well-being"

and to "promote interest, education, knowledge and pride in national heritage" (ibid). One of its goals was to make Ireland a centre of excellence in media production and the body also had a stated aim to:

> Enhance the provision of culture and creativity in every community; further develop Ireland as a global hub for film and TV production; empower and support our artists; drive investment in our cultural institutions; and further enhance our global reputation abroad (ibid).

Ebb and Flow was also uniquely provided with financial support by Sligo County Council. The film was provided with €3000 under the provisional title 'Wild Atlantic Women' from the 2019 Sligo County Council Creative Ireland Open Call (Mhic Amhlaidh 2024).[57] At a local level, this funding promotes "community collaboration" through an "arts process that actively involves the work of professional artists and community groups in creative and collaborative relationships" (Sligo Arts Service n.d.). At a national level, Creative Ireland pillar 2 grants are provided to projects that demonstrate their importance to creative communities, and to those that can broaden access and participation in cultural and creative activities that increase wellbeing, social cohesion, and economic development (Government of Ireland 2023). This is in itself remarkable given that only 9 years earlier surf films such as the Sligo/Strandhill based film *Waking Maeve* were entirely subcultural in their mode of finance and distribution. *Ebb and Flow* received media coverage in a variety of publications, including *Image* magazine (Heskin 2021), *The Sunday Times* (Siggins 2022), and *The Irish Independent* (Donaghy 2021). It was entered in numerous international film festivals in Ireland, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, the USA, and the UK, including the Dublin International Film Festival in 2021, and the Portuguese Surf Film

[57] This information was provided through a public information request to Sligo County Council. Edel Mhic Amhlaidh, Irish Language and Communications Officer at Sligo County Council, provided this public information in an email response to me on the 16/12/2024. Email available on request.

Festival, where the film won an award for “Best Women in Surf Film”. The film was also screened at the Honolulu Surf Film Festival and IndieCork Film Festival in Cork.

Ward made her film available on a variety of transactional streaming and on demand platforms. For example, *Ebb and Flow* is available on Amazon to rent priced at €4.49 and to buy for €9.99 (Amazon 2024). It is also available to buy on Vimeo on Demand for €8.29, and to rent for €2.48. The film is available to buy and rent on AppleTV and available to stream on Adventure Sports TV, an online streaming service dedicated to adventure sports (which costs roughly 30 euros for an annual subscription). The film can also be streamed on the GarageMovies.com subscription service. These models of distribution provide revenue directly to their creators. In the case of Amazon Prime Video, creators are provided with 50% of the net revenue of the production (Amazon 2024). Vimeo-on-Demand allows for the publication of content free from advertisements wherein creators recoup 90% of the net gross of their production. This emphasis on creators is one of the reasons it has become popular amongst niche video creators and filmmakers (Pullen 2011). The utilisation of transactional video platforms is a way in which highly skilled craft-based media practitioners can gain fair economic recompense for their work.

Figure 41: A still from Alice Maher's animation sequence in Ebb and Flow.

Ward's film is indicative of changes in the political economy of global surf culture. The market for short Irish surf films, which evolved during the 2010s, has become influenced by a greater number of female surfers which constitute a growing audience. This transformation is particularly evident within the context of Irish surf films. *Ebb and Flow* is a work of creative non-fiction infused with performative feminism. Alongside Easkey Britton's *A Lunar Cycle*, her work highlights how short Irish surf films have embraced these feminist themes, albeit remaining in the minority. By making her films available for purchase and rental rather than offering them for free, Ward not only demonstrates a commitment to securing funding from official funders of creative work and to gain financial compensation for her craft-based labour, but she also claims creative and economic power over her work. This approach allows her to maintain agency within the distribution process and provides her with control over both artistic and financial aspects of her career. Her approach represents an autonomous form of cultural production that presents a distinct challenge for political

economists of film and media. The final section will analyse why the short Irish surf films described in this chapter are problematic for hard theoretical interpretations of this theoretical perspective.

7.8 - Video Platforms and Creative Labour in the Short Irish Surf Film

The films described in this chapter are subcultural commodities with their own varied forms of political economy. Within the subcultural community these commodities act within a small-scale market economy. Rather than offering any major financial reward to their producers (in many cases none is sought, as exemplified by Dylan Stott), short Irish surf films act as a form of conspicuous production which carry social and cultural capital for the surfers, videographers, filmmakers, and brands who appear in, sponsor, or produce them (Triggs 2001, 99-115). But short Irish surf films are also commodities in the wider platform economy, and for the brands who sponsor them. The creative work and labour of surf filmmakers should be reassessed in these contexts.

Short Irish surf films represent a mode of economy that provide far greater social autonomy than most forms of media based cultural production. This is problematic for theoretical political economy of media because at the core of these "strong" theoretical interpretations is the idea that capitalist industrial systems are inherently exploitative of labour. Such positions argue that inequalities are always present in the power relations between artists, producers, and consumers. This perspective emanates from the historical pervasiveness of Marx's labour theory of value within popular interpretations of these theories. The theoretical consequence of this means that artists working within a capitalist system lack agency and autonomy, and that the drive for profit and revenue generation take primacy within this system. It is necessary to examine the films in terms of this theory

because the concepts of value – and labour - are interpreted differently by the subcultural market who consume the commodities, the brands that sponsor them, and the video platforms that exhibit and distribute them.

Stilwell asks "what determines the value of different goods and services?" (80). For example, is the value of something determined solely by its market price? Or, does value "reflect some innate characteristic of the product, or its measure of social worth?" (ibid). Stilwell also notes the relevance of "philosophical issues" alongside the empirical realities of economic theory in the determination of value. Some basic interpretations of value occur in classical political economy. The first is the distinction between value in use, and value in exchange. In this case, the conditions of supply are paramount in the cultivation of exchange value. Stillwell cites the water-diamond paradox (ibid). Water has more value in use than diamonds, and has a low market price. Yet diamonds have more value in exchange, with a far higher market price. The difference in cost reflects the differences in supply conditions. Water needs little labour to make available for consumption. Diamonds – like mainstream film productions - need a huge amount of labour to be made available on the market. In the case of the Irish surf edit, there is little widespread demand for the supply of the commodity outside a relatively small lifestyle based subcultural community. Therefore, prices are either low, or they involve little to no quantifiable prices. Within this community, the production of surf films is regarded for most filmmakers not as professional labour, but as a form of amateur creativity based in leisure.

The second distinction is that the value of a commodity reflects the cost of its production. Following the previous assumption, it was understood in classical political economy that "where labour is the sole principal cost, exchange values depend on the amount of labour expended" (81). This is the central idea in the labour theory of value. For

example, in both publicly and privately financed mainstream commercial film or TV productions, industries must find ways to finance all the workers who have enabled the production to exist, from carpenters to marketers. These costs were historically built into the price of a cinema ticket and now include the cost of streaming subscription services, and individual online rentals and purchases. Conversely, most Irish surf edits are made available for free on online video platforms, even though they often require a large amount of highly skilled craft based individual labour to produce. This appears paradoxical until it is accepted that most surf filmmakers do not produce surf films to recoup the costs of their labour, instead doing so as part of a youth driven community who are driven by social and cultural capital within the subculture, where value and labour are rewarded differently (the exception is Alice Rosaline Ward, who monetises her own films).

Clearly the films described in this chapter have social and cultural value for members of the surfing subcultural community in Ireland, for whom the films are a culturally specific art form. Although some edits have a commercial element, many are produced with little to no budget, with almost no economic return. This subcultural economy is ordered by the acquisition of social capital within the subculture, which can often, but not always, be transformed into minor amounts of economic capital. Unless the filmmaker is a professional videographer (who are almost always independent freelance workers), economic capital plays a minor role in comparison to the possible social capital that can be gained by putting a film online or having it screened at a film festival.

It is clear that for those involved in the production of short Irish surf films, it is leisure (attributable to social class, time, and youth) rather than labour that produces the commodity. For Veblen, in capitalist societies, value can lie beyond the economic field. Similarly, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains how taste is central to forms of social

distinction (Triggs 2001). This tendency can be seen in all of the films in this chapter. The social dimensions of production and consumption in Irish surf films often take precedence over economic gain, serving primarily as a means to sustain or engage with the surfing lifestyle. With minimal production and distribution costs, practitioners participate in an activity that aligns with their lifestyle—one they would likely pursue even in the absence of cameras. It is therefore leisure, based in youth and community, rather than labour, that drives the production of short Irish surf films. This inherent detachment from large scale economic amounts plays a significant role in how Irish surf films gain their autonomy.

Hard interpretations of the political economy of media might argue that these films are a form of user generated content that act as a form of free labour. Whilst video platforms provide new opportunities for filmmakers to exhibit and distribute their work, this could mean that creative artists might work without financial compensation, driven by passion, creativity, or the desire to engage with a community. This can create a form of unpaid labour whereby users contribute valuable content to platforms that profit from their work without providing direct financial rewards and generating revenue from user-generated content.

Platforms such as Vimeo reflect the varied economics of contemporary online video entertainment, with constantly evolving market specific revenue models, market structures, and programming content (Sherman and Waterman 2016). Their role is problematic, but in the case of Vimeo in particular (a favoured platform of independent filmmakers because of its creator friendly economic model) it seems that the benefits far outweigh the negatives. Vimeo offers an advertisement free form of revenue which reduces any outside commercial interests and it allows for the mass distribution of independently produced high definition filmmaking to potentially global audiences, which are often based

in online communities of interest. Filmmakers who choose to use Vimeo's transactional services can recoup 90% of their costs, which is a clearly transparent model in which video creators retain power and control over the economy of their films (Vimeo 2024). In this case, almost all surplus profits go the creators of the film. A basic Vimeo account is free; however, some filmmakers may pay a small subscription free to Vimeo to avail of their starter (€10), standard (€20) and business accounts (€60), which offer different plans relating to the amount of content that can be uploaded, alongside other features such as video analytics and engagement processes.

It is inescapable that surf films become a form of user generated content in the political economies of video hosting platforms, but it is also true that surf filmmakers have far greater autonomy in their own political economy because of their utilisation of such platforms. The power dynamics in the relationship between short surf filmmakers and video platforms provides creative artists with far greater autonomy than if they were to be produced within a major industrial system, removing the need for costs in all aspects of filmmaking, such as various costs in insurance, distribution, marketing, exhibition, post-production facilities, and film classifications. Platforms such as Vimeo are populated by what Jean Burgess refers to as "vernacular video" (2015, 2018). Vernacular video is a film language "practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture or commercial creative practice" (Burgess and Green 2009, 25) that stems from the relationship between online digital storytelling and vernacular creativity (2006). The growth of online vernacular video "is characterized by more hours of 'actuality' footage than we can either measure or imagine" (Dovey and Rose 2013, 1). Short Irish surf films are part of this vast archipelago of online content. They are also representative of what Dovey and Rose describe as "the great mapping of ourselves" in new forms of online documentary

filmmaking (ibid), which is a result of technological advances which have allowed anyone to make a film or video of almost any kind and to publish and distribute it online.

Lifestyle brands such Finisterre have very little prospect of any film they have supported recouping the finances they have provided. They clearly hope to gain cultural and social capital from these associations, and to enhance their finances based on product association, but there should not be an automatic assumption within theoretical political economy of media wherein any act of production associated with a capitalist entity is necessarily immoral.[58] Finisterre has a proven ethical approach to capitalism (Finisterre 2024), and the company has been a regular sponsor of Irish and British surf films and festivals for over 10 years. This appears to be based in a genuine interest in the support of the form. For example, the company recently funded Alice Rosaline Ward's 2024 film *Salt* as part of their Women of the Sea production fund (in conjunction with the London Surf Film Festival), which provides £5000 UK pounds for female filmmakers. The London Surf Festival website states that this fund is:

> Open exclusively to emerging or established women filmmakers…celebrating the stories and fortitude of women of the sea. Filmmakers were invited to submit their pitch for a film of up to 10 minutes in duration, that explores any aspect of surfing or surf culture that champions women making waves, commandeering space in the line-up (London Surf Film Festival 2024).

There is very little surplus value in Irish surf films even for filmmakers, and little to no economic return for regular film sponsors. Their real surplus value lies in forms of social and cultural capital, alongside the small amounts of economic capital that do circulate. In the political economy of short Irish surf films, labour is often based in leisure, where personal artistic interests and passion projects intermingle with social cultural and economic capital.

[58] This term is deliberately used. As stated in chapter 1, Political Economy is a form of moral philosophy concerned with ethics. This is then exercised as a form of critical analysis within fields of study such as film, media, and communication studies.

Hard interpretations of theoretical political economy ignore social realities such as the fact that many people pursue careers based in activities that blur the lines between labour and leisure. This includes artists, musicians, writers, and other creative professionals who have the freedom to engage in work that they enjoy. This is still productive labour – and potentially financially rewarding – but in the case of short Irish surf films it is based predominantly in a youthful and community-based form of artistic creation. It could be argued that the leisure time that surf filmmakers possess in order to create their art is purely based in the broader surplus economies of western capitalist societies, which itself enforces global inequalities caused by industrial capitalism. Ultimately this is the fallback position of hard forms of political economy of media. But it is impossible to offer such a structured, all encompassing, unified social theory of the political economy of media. No such singular theory exists, and this position removes all human agency and autonomy from creative artists by casting them as powerless in the face of international capital.

Short Irish surf films clearly provide a level of social, cultural and artistic autonomy in their production methods. Easily available digital technologies have enabled the emergence of a naturally evolving and socially autonomous subcultural filmmaking culture with almost zero costs in production, marketing, distribution, and exhibition. Short Irish surf films represent an original and innovative creative practice which has produced highly skilled craft-based forms of creative labour which are historically associated with the autonomy and agency of the individual artist.[59]

[59] See Sven Lutticken's edited volume *Art and Autonomy: A Critical Reader* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig 2022) and Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Duke University Press 2019). [68] The name 'Pockets Full of Water' emphasises the general lack of economic capital in the practice of surfing and the genre of the surf film.

7.9 - Conclusion

This chapter reflected on key arguments developed throughout the thesis. It examined the diverse political economies that shape the production of short Irish surf films and underscored how technological shifts, subcultural values, and alternative funding models (and sometimes no funding at all) have contributed to a rich and varied form of community based filmmaking which operates largely outside traditional media industry frameworks. The chapter noted the importance of short Irish surf films as a site of independent and autonomous cultural production, and offers broader insights into the changing nature of media economies in contemporary Ireland. The next chapter will analyse one of the distribution networks for such films: surf film festivals.

The films described in this chapter represent a variety of the economic models that exist in the production, distribution, and exhibition of the short Irish surf films also known as "edits". Yet still other variations of their political economy exist. For example, the Pockets Full of Water collaborative group produced *Wet Dreams* (2014) and *Dry Reality* (2016), both of which premiered in the Bundoran cineplex before wider releases on YouTube.[68] Wildlife filmmaker Ken O'Sullivan also produced a short Irish surf film titled *Reflections of an Underwater Cameraman* (2015) produced by his production company Sea Fever Productions (a film influenced by *Dark Side of the Lens* even in its title). Ireland also regularly features in examples of exogenous and international surf edits, such as Perry Gershkow's *Elude* (2020).

Fifteen years after they went viral through *Dark Side of the Lens*, short Irish surf films are now an established genre. Every Irish surf film festival between 2013 and 2024 has hosted a short film/edit competition, which highlights the consistency of the form. This sustained form of cultural production has created a local craft-based industry of highly skilled professional and semi-professional filmmakers such as Clem McInerney, Kev L. Smith, and Alice Rosaline Ward, who can support themselves financially through their work. This is based in what Paul Dwyer describes as 'a "craft" model of independent

media production work, “best learned through observation, practice” (Dwyer 2019, 1) wherein the artist retains their agency through personal forms of creative practice. This vernacular form exists and sustains itself outside mainstream industrial systems of media production in Ireland (as described by Barton), and most of its practitioners have no connection to traditional educational or professional frameworks for documentary or narrative production. In their unique modes of exhibition and distribution, short Irish surf films represent a “shadow economy” to mainstream screen culture in Ireland. This shadow economy is based in an alternative and informal film distribution culture, which is turn connected to a participatory subculture characterised by its own “networks with their own logics, strategies and ambitions” (Lobato 2018, 12). It is a genre that is defined by its status as a youth driven, community-based form of filmmaking based in spectacle, creative performativity, and an aesthetic tendency towards radical delirium.

Chapter 8 - Surf Film Festivals and Sites of Exhibition in the Political Economy of Irish Surf Movies

This chapter moves beyond individual films to analyse the broader role of surf film festivals in the production, distribution, and exhibition of Irish surf films—particularly the short films discussed in the previous chapter. It explores how these festivals function as key sites of exhibition within the political economy of Irish surf cinema. The chapter shows that such festivals are sustained not by economic profit, but by networks of social and cultural capital embedded within the surfing subculture.

8.1 - Introduction

One of the most distinctive aspects of the political economy of Irish surf films lies in their varied modes of production, exhibition, and distribution. Over the past two decades, some Irish surf films - such as *Waveriders* (Conroy, 2008) and *Between Land and Sea* (Whitaker, 2016) - have been exhibited through traditional channels of film distribution involving cinematic classifications, marketing campaigns, and national film releases. However, most Irish surf films are consumed through subcultural means of exhibition. Beyond cinema releases, Irish surf films have had localized cinema screenings (*Wet Dreams)*, some have toured international film festivals (*Keep it a Secret*), some have been screened on Irish television (*The Silver Surfari*, *Sea Fever*), and some have been released on DVD. Today, nearly all subcultural surf films are now exhibited on streaming platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube. In addition to localized cinema screenings and online releases, a burgeoning growth in Irish surf film festivals has occurred since 2012. The most recent iteration of this was the aptly titled Irish Surf Film Festival, staged at the Pálás cinema in Galway in November 2023 and 2024 (Galway Tourism 2024).

This chapter is an analysis of the political economy of Irish surf film festivals since their beginning in 2013. The study of film festivals is an under researched area of Irish film

studies requires further critical investigation, although work on the subject has been conducted by Kevin Rockett (2011), Flynn and Tracy (2019) and Healion, O'Driscoll, O'Meara, and Stone (2020). Film festivals are an important component of the political economy of filmmaking in general, and Irish surf film festivals have their own systems, circuits and networks which rarely overlap with mainstream filmmaking cultures**.** The chapter will firstly provide an overview of the recent growth of film festival culture in Ireland, before providing a historical and social context for the emergence of Irish surf and adventure themed festivals. It be will argued that surf and lifestyle film festivals can be understood in terms of the political economy of local cinema and as a form of participatory community cinema. The chapter will then show that whilst most surf film festivals sit outside traditional modes of film exhibition and distribution, they maintain their own film "culture" with professional practices which still act as "industry nodes", albeit different to those of mainstream cinemas as described by Dina Iordanova (2015). Utilising Janet Harbord's definition of film cultures, the chapter will argue that film festivals represent spaces of flow for niche film cultures, and in this case, the production culture of Irish surf filmmaking. Finally, the chapter will employ a Bourdieusian analysis of the role of capital in cultural production to show that social and symbolic capital are key to understanding the political economy of Irish surf film festivals, rather than a primary focus on economic capital. The chapter will show that these festivals also generate forms of cultural and artistic legitimisation for surf films, providing them with a platform by which they can be considered as defined forms of cinematic expression.

The emergence of Irish surf film festivals is representative of the digital fragmentation of contemporary cinema that authors such as Thomas Elsaesser (2005), Marijke De Valcke (2016) have described. With relatively easy access to modes of online exhibition, there is no economic necessity for film festival exhibition within the culture of

Irish surf filmmaking. It can therefore be argued that Irish surf film festivals are symbolic cultural events which maintain and perpetuate a sense of subcultural community. Community forms of cinemas can be regarded as forms of alternative media which "offer diverse content to audiences, who are regarded as collaborators rather than clients" (Bergillos 45).

Marijke De Valck argues all that film festivals should be regarded as sites of power which bestow "prestige on the films and filmmakers that were selected for the event" and as "sites of leisure, where public and professionals alike are courted to indulge themselves" (De Valcke 2016, 1). She also shows that film festivals are "events that are relevant for society, that matter in the lives of people visiting them, offering a social environment where one can feel part of a community" (ibid). This chapter will invoke these ideas to show that Irish surf film festivals engage with their own subcultural communities and lifestyle industries to create a public sphere in which surf filmmaking is valorised and recognised as a legitimate cinematic practice.

8.2 – Surf and Adventure Film Festivals in Ireland: Context.

In "Fighting the Festival Apocalypse" (2011), Kirsten Stevens describes the seemingly unending global growth in film festivals:

> Over the last few decades, the range and number of film festivals has multiplied exponentially, with most countries now hosting at least one official event annually, and many hosting several. Add to these official celebrations the numerous thematic programs characteristic of genre festivals and community events, and the tally of cinematic celebrations globally becomes staggering (140).

She describes that by 2011 Melbourne (Australia) was the host city to over 30 different film festivals, raising the possibility of an eventual possibility of event saturation due to

the mass proliferation of festivals (141). Yet rather than being representative of a "festival apocalypse", Stevens notes that the film festival scene in Melbourne was in fact flourishing, ranging from horror festivals to festivals based on spirituality, such as the Buddhist film festival. She argues that these constitute "parallel circuits that operate simultaneously and harmoniously beside one another" (144). Echoing the global expansion of this trend, Mark Peranson states that "festivals are popping up like Starbucks franchises" (2002, 23).

This trend can also be seen in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, where an increasing number of film festivals now exist both in and outside the capital cities of Dublin and Belfast. This chapter concerns this proliferation of film festivals in Ireland, of which surf, adventure and other lifestyle-based film festivals form constituting elements. Within the hierarchical circuit of Irish film festivals, festivals exist on a spectrum of scale and impact. International film festivals exist in Ireland with relatively mainstream films as their focus (Dublin International Film festival, the Belfast Film Festival, Galway Film Fleadh, Cork International Film Festival). There are also festivals of varying size with documentary films as their focus (Stranger Than Fiction, Wexford Documentary Film Festival). There are festivals which focus on specific genres (IFI Horrorthon), youth film festivals (First Cut! Pop Up Youth Film Festival), festivals based on identity politics (GAZE – LGBT festival), festivals based on independent filmmaking (Underground Film Festival, Darklight), rural film festivals (Achill Island International Film Festival, Mayo International Film Festival), amateur participatory festivals (Rathmullan Film Festival), and festivals based on lifestyles/subcultures. There are also a variety of national cinema festivals staged primarily at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin, such as the IFI French Film Festival and the Kinopolis Polish Film Festival.

This proliferation of festivals can be understood as a consequence of vast changes to film culture that digital production and exhibition technologies have wrought (discussed in the previous chapters). This proliferation is also closely linked to the growth of event culture and has been regarded by some representative of a trend towards the neoliberal eventisisation of culture, whereby all culture can be turned into a commercial enterprise (Loist 2016, 4964). Beyond the screening of films, the marketisation of Irish film festivals can also be understood as a means to encourage economic growth in cities and regions though the festivalisation of culture, which occurs beyond simply film festivals. Film festivals are also a means to promote cultural tourism and they are occasionally influenced by local and national forms of cultural policy as a means to incentivise the relationship between film festivals and tourism (Cudny 2011, 2013; Grunwell 2007).

Irish film festivals featuring lifestyle sports as their aesthetic focus began with the first Irish adventure film festival in 2012. This event was staged in Galway as the What If, Why Not? Adventure Film Festival. Run by Graham Clarke, this festival relocated to Westport in County Mayo in 2018, becoming rebranded as the Irish Adventure Film Festival. The festival features adventure films about a broad variety of lifestyle sports such as rock climbing (*The Dawn Wall* (Josh Lowell, Peter Mortimer 2017) mountain running (*Ar Gefn y Ddraig* (Huw Erdynn, Wales 2018), ice swimming, and skateboarding, with international surf films often part of the lineup.

Irish Film festivals with surf cinema as their generic focus began in 2013 with the "Shore Shots" Irish Surf Film Festival. This festival was staged at the Lighthouse Cinema at Smithfield in Dublin on March 22nd and 23rd 2013, with connected live music and social events held at the Generator hostel in Smithfield. "Shore Shots" was initially sponsored by the Monster Energy drink, who have also funded Irish surf filmmaking, such as Ross

Cairn's *Powers of Three*. This festival set the tone and format for Irish surf film festivals that would follow, exhibiting a mixture of Irish produced short surf films (known as "edits" – see chapter 6), alongside international edits, and the Irish premieres of feature length international releases such as the 3D spectacle *Storm Surfers* (Justin McMillan and Christopher Nelius Australia, 2012), *Here and Now* (Taylor Steele 2012), and *North of the Sun* (Jorn Nyseth Ranum and Inge Wegge 2012). The "Shore Shots" festival was influenced by the vibrant short surf film culture which had developed in Ireland since Joel Conroy's 2002 film *Eye of the Storm*, and had by 2010 had established itself widely on streaming platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. The festival was also influenced by the gradual expansion of international surf and adventure film festivals such as the London Surf Film Festival, which was founded in 2011 by Chris Nelson and Debbie Taylor, and is now the largest surf film festival in Ireland and Great Britain (London Surf Film Festival 2024). The stated aim of the London Surf Film Festival is to "bring together the UK surfing tribes to share the stoke, the storytelling and the cream of surf culture" (London Surf Film Festival n.d). These aims are shared by Irish surf film festivals, albeit on a smaller scale and with less financial influence. These differences between large scale and small-scale festivals on the surf film festival circuit evoke Mark Peranson's idea of "core/periphery system" on the mainstream film festival circuit, in which peripheral festivals maintain greater independence and community than those at the core of the system (2002).

Among the entries for the best Irish "edit" award at "Shore Shots" in 2013 were a diverse range of films including Orla Walsh's narrative short film *Riders to the Sea* (2020), which was funded by the then Irish Film Board, a collaboration between Cornish filmmaker Mickey Smith and Clare surfer Fergal Smith titled *Winter* (the competition winner), French filmmaker Marion Poizneau's Iran based documentary *Into the Sea*, which

follows Donegal surfer Easkey Britton as she encourages Iranian girls to surf, and an early short by Kev L. Smith titled *An Evening with Robin.* The festival moved to Sligo in 2016 and ran for 6 years until 2018, where *A Lunar Cycle* (Andrew Kaineder 2018) featuring Easkey Britton won the top prize. The festival had the full support and participation of the surfing community, in many ways epitomising the most altruistic understandings of Jenkin's idea of participatory culture (Delwiche and Henderson 2012, 3-9). The "Shore Shots" festival also aligned with environmental discourses. Coinciding with Earth day, the 2018 event included a focus on the environment and local ecology, beginning with a beach clean at Strandhill, County Sligo, alongside a marram grass planting session. The event then staged a panel discussion on single use plastic pollution in the ocean and screened documentary films with an environmental discourse, including *Smog of the Sea* (Ian Cheney 2017) and *A Plastic Ocean* (Craig Leeson 2016). It is representative of the success of the "Shore Shots" festival that its final iteration in 2018 had 14 entries in the Irish "edit" competition category.

One of the event organisers, Allan Mulrooney, discussed the reasons for the festival's existence, its relationship with the subculture, and the reasons for its eventual cessation in a 2018 social media post (Mulrooney 2018). Mulrooney had been a brand manager for Monster Energy when approached by Aidan Ellis and Shane Meehan to help sponsor the festival. Noting the peripheral nature of Ireland's surfing spaces in comparison to its centralised urban populations, Mulrooney stated that it "was much easier to get media attention for an event based in the capital", which is the reason the festival began in Dublin rather than in a region where surfing actually took place. Mulrooney moved the festival to the Model Arts Centre in Sligo in 2016 to reengage with the surfing community, but also noted that ultimately it suited his lifestyle and family life to stage the event in the west of Ireland. Discussing the change of venue to the Wild Atlantic Way,

Mulrooney noted that the festival gradually expanded to include elements of an arts festival:

> Along with the move west came an evolution in the brand and the project. The new venue for the festival represented a natural home and from a PR perspective, it had the potential to become the perfect event for Sligo. In 2016, we added more talks, more discussion panels and opened up the event to a more varied culture and art scene…This we felt was a huge success and allowed us to reach a new audience (paragraph 4).

Mulrooney also noted what he saw as the authenticity of the event due to its embeddedness in the community as something that made the festival unique:

> The event for me has always been a celebration of cold-water surfing, a chance to bring together the surf community under one roof and more recently, a chance to showcase the work/life balance and the lifestyle choice on offer in the North West. I meet people at Shore Shots I only see once a year. The energy in the venue is something I haven't seen within the surf scene in Ireland or elsewhere and in my opinion is very hard to replicate. That authentic atmosphere is something most events thrive to create, but it was a natural evolution for Shore Shots because of the surfers and ocean lovers it attracted (paragraph 5).

The event organisers were also acutely aware of the relationship between their festival and the political economy of Irish surfing industries. Mulrooney discussed the importance of "Shore Shots" to the economies of Irish surfing industries and tourism, but also the wider potential regional benefits in terms of economic growth and branding strategies, stating that:

> Last April saw over 300 surfers, outdoor enthusiasts and movie buffs make their way to Sligo for the sixth edition of the Festival. These surfers spend money locally in hotels, hostels, coffee shops, petrol stations and bars. Its economic benefits are small but it helps to improve the overall brand/image for Sligo and for one weekend much of the European surf media is focused on the north west of Ireland (paragraph 6).

"Shore Shots" exceeded expectations during its existence with minor sources of funding and a small budget which caused the festival to be "creative in what we do, who

we invite, and what we offer in return" (ibid). Ultimately Mulrooney, Ellis and O'Donoghue found it economically unviable to run the festival because of a lack of adequate funding and support. Mulrooney explained the economic necessities of running a festival, stating that "in order to pay movie screening fees, venue hire, flights for media/speakers and accommodation we depend on funding/support or brands coming on board to help the event. This, as anyone who runs events will know has become increasingly difficult" (ibid). Additionally, Mulrooney felt that regardless of the west of Ireland's status as a central tourist location through the Wild Atlantic Way, the peripheral status of rural coastal spaces meant that "getting buy in from brands both global and domestic can be almost impossible" (paragraph 9). The co-founders announced after their 2018 festival that "at this stage it looks like we will call it a day for Shore Shots. Without more support, help, funding or a brand with an interest in reaching the surf scene, we run the risk of replicating the event without growth and losing the love for it" (paragraph 17).

An even smaller festival ran in the Bundoran Multiplex cinema from 2016 to 2018. This was known as the Pocket Film Festival, and run by the collaborative production group Pockets Full of Water, led by Giles Carey. Carey had previously produced two 30-minute surf films titled *Wet Dreams* (2014), which was screened locally in the Bundoran Eclipse Multiplex to a packed audience in January 2014, and *Dry Reality* (2016), which was exhibited on YouTube. The meagre economy of this festival is best described in the tagline to its 10-euro admission price which was claimed to be "in support of having a laugh". By 2019, the main Irish surf film festival was the Doolin Surf-Fest, which was based in the same communality and subcultural values as "Shore Shots", but aimed at a broader lifestyle market than purely surf filmgoers. This festival was scheduled to happen in 2020 with a short film competition, a Wim Hoff method workshop, foraging lessons, bouldering,

yoga classes, and a surfer's market, alongside live music. However, the event was cancelled due to the coronavirus outbreak and has not been resurrected, highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on global film festivals (Salti 2020, 88-96).

The community-based ethos of these festivals continued for the first-time post coronavirus at the 2023 Irish Surf Film Festival organised by Irish surfer, Tom Gillespie. This festival was staged at the now closed Pálás cinema in Galway in November 2023, a location which described itself as an "arthouse cinema and cultural space" (Pálás 2023). This festival had a significant presence on social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter (X) and on Youtube, where it provided a consistent retrospective of selected old Irish surf films and also screened trailers for upcoming films (Irish Surf Film Festival 2024). Awards were offered for best wave, best short film, and best photograph. Filmmakers were awarded a cash prize of 1000 euro for winning best short film and best photograph. This was the first Irish surf film festival to place limits on the submissions, stating in its rules that "The spirit of The Irish Surf Film Festival (ISFF) is that it is for the Irish surf community - riders, filmers (sic) and photographers - as such, entrants should be living in Ireland (ROI or NI), for at least 6 months of the year" (Irish Surf Film Festival 2024). The Irish Surf Film Festival took place over one day and night, screening 5 feature films during the day, including Sean Duggan's 2022 documentary about the history of Irish surfing, *Keep it A Secret*, before a short film competition that screened 8 Irish films. Some of these edits featured distinctly transnational themes and peripatetic figures in Irish surf culture, such as Alice Rosaline Ward's *Oishii,* which featured Australian surfer Julian Farmer and his penchant for Japanese food. Other films featured a mix of Irish and non-Irish filmmakers and surfers, including *Blow In* (Andrew Kaineder/Joao Tudella 2023), *Calming Chaos* (Ben Bettridge 2023), *Fluid Druid* (Seamus McGoldrick/Diego Balestro 2023),

Hounds of the Storm (Clem McInerney 2023), *Long Run* (George Karbus 2023), *Pillow Point* (Liam Grant 2023), and *We Out Dere* (Eric Witkoff 2023).

The Irish Surf Film Festival was sponsored by the UK based lifestyle clothing brand, Finisterre, and supported by Galway City Council. This is the first instance of direct funding and support through local cultural policy in Irish surf film festivals. Organiser Tom Gillespie stated on the festivals Instagram page that "it is so important for something like this to have the support from public funds" (Gillespie 2023). Like "Shore Shots", the Irish Surf Film Festival also aligned itself with forms of environmental discourse in that the festival was also supported by Fair Seas Ireland, a coalition of Irelands leading environmental nongovernmental organisations and environmental networks, who have called for 30% of Irelands ocean territory to be protected (Fair Seas Ireland 2023). This festival also featured well-known national and international figures in surf culture as judges and contributors, such as pro surfer Nathan Florence, which arguably provided it with greater international exposure.

As will be described later in this chapter, Irish surf and adventure film festivals operate within networks of power that are outside mainstream Irish screen industries and thus do not have the same economic or commercial relationships as mainstream industrial film festival networks. They also do not exist within economies of scale, and provide little commercial profit or even potential profit to their organisers, or to filmmakers. Although economic capital is clearly sought after, particularly by those working as professional videographers, photographers and filmmakers within the surfing industries, the political economy of such subcultural festivals is based on a blend of economic and social capital. As described within the chapter on cultural politics, this subcultural capital acts as a form of currency within the national and international surfing subcultures, providing acclaim and recognition to those involved. The economic dynamics of these festivals involves

funding and sponsorship from companies who are either part of the surfing industries (Finisterre), or those who utilise surfing (and other extreme or lifestyle sports) as a means to further their brand strategy, such as Monster energy, who claim on their website that:

> Monster Energy is not just a drink. It's a lifestyle in a can. We support the scene, our bands, our athletes and our fans. We back athletes so they can make a career out of their passion. We promote concert tours, so our favourite bands can visit your hometown. We celebrate with our fans and riders by throwing parties and making the coolest events we can think of a reality (Monster Energy n.d.).

In this sense, surf film festivals still touch industrial nodes, although these nodes are not those associated with the production cultures of mainstream industrial filmmaking. However, funding and sponsorship of mainstream filmmaking events is often influenced by funding sources that are disconnected from the world of filmmaking. Janet Harbord points out that concerns were made public at the Berlin film festival in 2000 regarding the extent of advertising for the L'Oreal company (2002, 59), which suggests that differences in the structural form of festival funding are not that dissimilar.

Whilst surf films may appear initially as local festivals, or as local iterations of international festivals, they are in fact festivals with the involvement of a national subculture and with a potential international reach within the global surfing community. It should also be emphasised that The Irish Surf Film festival imagined itself as a 'national' form of festival in a way that previous iterations had perhaps not. Locally produced films are screened at the festivals and released quickly online, if they are not already released by the time of screening, to potentially global audiences. The surfing subculture is therefore a community of interest, existing in real world practices and as an online community of participants and fans which offers a combination of local, global, national, transnational and potentially postnational qualities. Iordanova argues that this transnational element is an inherent quality of all contemporary international film festivals (2015) and that this is part

of the wider transition from national, to transnational forms of cinema. She states that "in a globalized context, it is the film festivals inherent transnationalism that counterbalances nationalist tendencies, thus facilitating exchanges in production and circulation" (Iordanova 2015, 7). These transnational networks of circulation also operate within surf and adventure film festivals, where specialist forms of online streaming and distribution – such as Garage Movies and The Surf Network - eventually exhibit many of the films.[60] These streaming services exist alongside now established online modes of distribution, such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Vimeo-on-Demand.

This surf filmmaking culture now operates a sub circuit of surf film festivals existing in locations that includes New York, Paris, Honolulu, Cape Town, Bilbao, San Sebastien, Santa Barbara, Kona, North Shore, Bali, Brest and Anglet (France) Ericeira (Portugal), Ubatuba (Sao Paolo, Brazil), Rio De Janeiro, alongside the aforementioned London and Paris festivals. Surf films are also often screened at adventure film festivals and other niche lifestyle sport festivals around the world. In the surf films screened at Irish surf film festivals, this transnational element in exhibition and distribution can also be observed in those who direct, produce, and feature in the films. Many short films screened at festivals have been produced by, or featured, people from outside Ireland, and this tendency is also true of the films screened at the 2023 Irish Surf Film Festival (and its 2024 edition).

It can be argued that the political economy of "Shore Shots", the Doolin Surfest, and the Irish Surf Film Festival are based in a form of participatory, independent, "community" cinema (Bergillos 2020, 43-44) which has its own distinct subcultural

[60] 'Garage Movies' (www.Garage.Movies.com) is an Australian online distributor of adventure films. 'The Surf Network' (www.thesurfnetwork.com) is an American website and the world's largest distributor of surf films.

politics (see chapter two). The role of the subcultural community is particularly evident at Irish surf film festivals, where the surfing community and its spatial manifestations in Ireland are still relatively small. For example, within the paradigm of Irish surf film festivals, there is an intermingling of surfers, filmmakers, photographers, videographers and producers who are generally composed of those from within the subculture. Many attendees at surf film festivals know each other based on prior interactions on the west coast, where many of whom surf or work together. Wider audiences are also very often members of the lifestyle community/subculture, and if not, they are part of an imagined online community, or ancillary consumers of the Irish surfing lifestyle. This creates a feeling of inclusive participation, reflecting Henry Jenkins' key ideas for a successful creative participatory culture (Jenkins 2006, 7), which includes "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (7). This participatory culture "is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created)" (7). This participatory community element is a prominent aspect of Irish surf film festivals, wherein audiences "are regarded as collaborators rather than clients" (Bergillos, 45). As a form of alternative media, the participatory film festivals "facilitate engagement with communities…are independent from economic interests and they are oriented towards participatory processes and social change" (45). This can clearly be seen in the example of the aforementioned environmental discourses in Irish surf film festivals, which are often orientated to ideas of ecological conservation.

This participatory community produces a Habermasian 'public sphere' for the Irish surfing subculture, and the film culture of surf filmmaking. Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong

analyses the both "'A'" list and "alternative" film festivals as public spheres, arguing that the "governmental, nongovernmental, independent, commercial and transnational natures of film festivals create different relations to public power and private interests within which public spheres emerge" (85). Irish surf film festivals can also be regarded as a form of public sphere that addresses a specific subcultural and lifestyle-based audience, and where the practice of surf filmmaking is discussed and debated, where social and environmental concerns can be expressed, and where the festival space turns into a conduit which recreates publics and discourses (Hing-Yuk Wong 2011, 159-189, 2016, 83-99). In addition, since the "Shore Shots" festival moved to the Model Arts Theatre in County Sligo, the public sphere of Irish surf film festivals has become grounded in regional locality, which is reflective of what Iordanova describes as a "new localism" that manifests itself in terms of dynamic regional production and distribution networks" (2016, xiv). They are also part of a transnational network which confers cultural legitimisation and value on surf films as a form of cinema through a system of awards and subcultural recognition (this will be discussed later in this chapter).

Irish surf and adventure themed film festivals – and other niche Irish film festivals - also fall into a category that Mark Peranson describes as audience festivals (2002, 2). Peranson makes a clear distinction between business festivals and audience festivals. For Peranson, audience festivals have a small budget and are not concerned with premieres, they have limited corporate sponsorship, a limited number of guests, little business presence, small staff, minor competitions, no investment in films, and few retrospectives. Peranson highlights the economic differences between these festivals, showing that a business festival (The Dublin International Film Festival, for example) is used as a domestic launchpad for soon to be released films, and a place to promote and sell films to distributors (7). This is a now a standardised process in the political economy of national

cinema, with junkets for critics, and the appearance of celebrities. However, with less emphasis on economic imperatives, audience festivals, such as “Shore Shots”, are free to screen films that may not generate any revenue.

The community also have the capacity to act as gatekeepers, managing the artistic parameters of the creative practice of Irish surf filmmaking. Therefore, surf film festivals maintain a curatorial role, informing taste and aesthetics in the genre (Rastagar 2016). As will be described later in this chapter, this management of taste confers symbolic value on the films screened at the festivals. The existence of such festivals also acts a form of cultural legitimisation for the genre itself, providing the films with a cinematic platform that their peripheral status with regard to mainstream filmmaking and film festivals may not allow for. An indication of the close relationship between Irish surf film festivals with the physical community of surfers (who mostly reside on the Western, Northern and Southern coastlines) is that the “Shore Shots” festival eventually moved to Sligo in 2016 (a mecca for surfers), the Doolin Surf-Fest was held in the surfing region of County Clare, and the Irish Surf Film Festival was staged in Galway (which although an urban centre is culturally associated to the rural west of Ireland in a way that Dublin is not). Irish surf film festivals are then a form of regional community media which “defend cultural expressions that reinforce local identity”, acting as a form of resistance to dominant cultures that “marginalise them and make them invisible” (Bergillos, 44).

8.3 - Sites of Exhibition Outside the Festival Circuit.

Beyond the festival circuit, many Irish surf films have been exhibited in cinemas in both urban and rural regions of Ireland, in spaces that are often considered peripheral to Irish film culture, such as the Bundoran Cineplex. Bundoran is one of the biggest surf towns in

Irish surf culture, and home to a community of local and international surfers. The Bundoran Cineplex has been one of the biggest supporters of independent Irish surf cinema, where major subcultural releases such as *Into the Sea* (2017) and *Savage Waters* (2023) have received advanced screenings with Q&A sessions. This cinema also screened the independent and locally produced film *Wet Dreams* (Pockets Full of Water, 2014) and two one day "Pockets" surf film festivals. At the screening of *Wet Dreams*, audiences sat on the aisles and on the ground in front of the screen due to the scale of local interest. I presented the Irish premiere of *Into the Sea* at this cinema in 2015, and I interviewed Joel Conroy in the Bundoran cineplex after a screening of *Waveriders* at the Transatlantic Connections conference. Additionally, the Playhouse cinema in Portrush has staged screenings of local surf films, such as *No Boarders*, and *Children of the Norn*. Screenings have also taken place in pubs in Bundoran, such as the premiere of *Made in Ireland* at the The Chasin Bull.

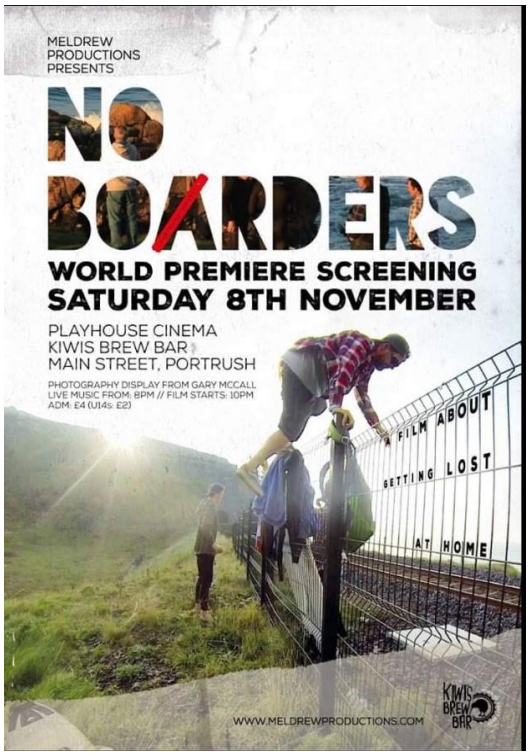

Figure 42: Meldrew Productions film No Boarders was first screened at the Playhouse Cinema in Portrush, Northern Ireland.

8.4 - Theorising Film Festivals in the Political Economy of Cinema.

Since what is regarded as the very first film festival in Venice in 1932, film festivals have "grown exponentially in both scope and scale", now commanding "a place of central importance in global film culture" (Kredell 2016, 15). As festival culture grew in places such as Cannes (1946), Berlin (1951), and Rotterdam (1972), the expansion of the international film festival circuit from the 1980s onwards became "sweepingly professionalized and institutionalized" (De Valck 2007, 20). This growth created defined networks and hierarchies of circulation that continue to expand (Loist 2016; Stevens 2016). Today, thousands of film festivals exist which play a significant role in the political economy of a variety of global cinematic forms (mainstream, independent, art house, and national cinemas), whilst also being *events* which are closely related to economic growth, tourism, and cultural policy (Peranson 2008; Quinn, 2013, 2019). Janet Harbord (2002) argues that the gradual distinctions between mainstream and arthouse film festivals during the 20th century influenced the aesthetics of the cinematic form based on festival type, creating distinctly oppositional "film cultures" as a result. Dina Iordanova argues for a framework in which film festivals are studied as phenomenon in themselves, regardless of the aesthetics of the films screened, and independently from national film networks or industry concerns, arguing that "recognition needs to be given to the emergence of the film festival as a hub of exchange in its own right" (2016, xii). When analysed from this perspective, the political economy of festivals can be connected to wider studies of the public sphere, cultural policy, cultural diplomacy, and tourism, amongst others.

Yet film festivals have historically not been afforded the same analytical and critical attention as either film texts, or industries (Iordanova 2016, xii; de Valck 2007, 16). Historical studies such as Kenneth Turan's (2002) have been prevalent, but as Iordanova

describes, “there is the privileged relationship that persists between film studies and just one of its disciplinary strands, textual analysis. To analyse film merely as text is to leave unexplored most of the actual context of a films reception, and this is where the festival plays a role in reality” (xi). This mode of enquiry aligns with the Tom O’Regan’s definition of “strong” political economy (2008, 461), and the perspectives of Thomas Guback (1969), Janet Wasko (1981), Eileen Meehan (2007), and Vincent Mosco (2009) on the political economy of media, as articulated in chapter one. Iordanova goes on to describe that “it is the dominance of textual analysis, national frameworks, and industry studies that has significantly delayed a turning of attention to the film festival as a phenomenon that best reveals film culture’s transnational essence” (xii). The academic turn towards the festival as a site of meaning has meant that the study of festivals has grown significantly in the past 20 years (Papadimitrou and Ruoff 2016). This increased attention can be seen in a wide range of studies such as Janet Harbord *Film Cultures* (2002), Thomas Elsaesser’s *European Cinema: Face to Face With Hollywood* (2005), Marijke de Valck’s *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephelia* (2007) and other studies (2008, 2010, 2014, 2016), Cindy Wong’s *Film Festivals* (2011), Dina Iordanova’s *The Film Festival Reader* and other studies (2009, 2012, 2013, 2015), and de Valck, Kredell and Loist’s *Film Festivals: History Theory, Practice* (2016). Film festivals have also been studied for their connections to national cinema (Czach, 2004), their relationship to labour (Czach, 2016), and their relationship to tourism, economics, and cultural policy (Cordoba, 2022). There has also been a considerable recent focus on the comparative analysis and profiling of film festival attendees (Grunwell, Ha, Martin, 2008, Baez and Devesa, 2014, Ercolano and Gaeta, 2017).

8.5 - Networks, Hierarchies, and Niche Film Festivals.

As Peranson (2002, 22-37) notes, film festivals are central to the political economy of contemporary forms of cinema, particularly as alternative distribution networks for commercially unviable films (23). Irish surf film festivals can similarly be regarded as part of an alternative distribution system, aided by online forms of distribution such as social media and video hosting websites. This trend was noted in 2008 by De Valck, who commented on the significant role that converged media and digitization had already begun to play in the way film festivals were manifesting, with a far greater number of festivals occurring due to greater access to digital production and distribution technologies. De Valck uses the term "exploding cinema" to characterise a future in which "the traditional cinema theatre would no longer be the place where cinema would manifest itself" (2008). De Valck believed that the consequence of this would mean that festivals would lose ground to digital distribution technologies (2008, 9), but this has not been the case.

Irish surf films are just one of many niche film cultures which instead have instead fostered a close relationship between festivals and online modes of distribution. The growth in niche film festivals plays a key role in sustaining niche film cultures such as surf filmmaking through the creation and sustainability of labour within its specific market. However, the concept of labour in surf film festivals as means to grow economic capital is not always the reason why this labour takes place (as this chapter will later show). The emergence of the sub circuit of surf film festivals has already been noted by De Valck who notes that "the Portuguese island of Madeira, a paradise for advanced surfers seeking big waves, has hosted the Madeira Island Surf Film Festival (MadSwell) since 2013 in the

municipal theater and on the beaches of the capital city, Funchal" (2016, 3). De Valck also highlights the emergence of adventure film festivals, such as the Mountain film festival in Patagonia, Chile, and regards other lifestyle film festivals, such as the Napa Valley Food Film Festivals as part of emergent digital niche festivals (3).

Skadi Loist (2016) describes the international festival circuit is a hierarchical system which governs the spatial networks and the circulation of films. Referring to mainstream film culture, Loist argues that contemporary film festival culture is part of a "vast global network" with several "parallel, sub-, and short circuits" in the system (53). She traces this diversification to the emergence in the 1960s of smaller film festivals with alternative agendas such as various national cinema festivals, and Third cinema and Avant Garde festivals. This destabilised the hierarchies of competitive A list festivals and in the 1970s a variety of indie and second tier festivals emerged, such as Sundance and Rotterdam (57). Gradually the 1990s saw the emergence of specialised film festivals, such as diasporic festivals, ethnic festivals, identity-based festivals, activist festivals, which all proliferated in the following decades. These specialised festivals often act as alternative systems of distribution. Elsaesser (2015) and De Valcke (2007) refer to these systems as "networks", whilst others refer to these systems as "circuits", wherein film professionals, films, and accreditation systems all have agency. Perhaps the most apt term to describe the diversification of festivals is as an "archipelago" (Neves 212; Frodon 2014), which refers to a chain, or cluster of islands, and "allows thinking of rupture and continuity simultaneously" (Robbins and Saglier 2015, 4). How can Irish surf film festivals be defined within the context, and what are their networks and hierarchies, if any?

Irish Surf film festivals are participatory forms of community cinema whose existence is at the periphery of mainstream filmmaking culture in Ireland, with many

unaware of their existence. Yet they are part of a postnational form of circulation in which localised communities (such as the Irish surfing community) interact with other similarly localised communities around the world. As discussed in the previous section, this form of circulation now has its own national and international circuits which exist parallel to mainstream cinema. London now dominates the European hierarchy of the surf film festival network, but as described earlier, surf film festivals also exist in France, Spain (Bilbao, San Sebastien), Portugal (Ericeria Surf Film Festival) and Norway (Undstad Arctic Film Festival 2024). In the United States, Honolulu and Santa Barbara stage some of the biggest surf film festivals, whilst New York hosted its own between 2008 and 2013 (New York Surf Film Festival 2024). Australia hosts a variety of surf film festivals, such as the Australian Surf Film Festival (held in Sydney), the Bells Beach Surf Film Festival, and the Noosa Surf Film Festival. There are also major surf film festivals in Brazil (Ubataba), South Africa (Wavescape), Argentina (Mar Del Plata), and New Zealand (Aotearoa Surf film festival).

An important step in interpreting the political economy of the international hierarchical circuit of surf film festivals is "the circulation of money, for instance in the form of distribution revenue or film production funds flowing through the increasing number of markets…on the festival circuit" (Loist 2016, 52). Economic considerations are highly important to the politics of circulation at many of the international surf film festivals described above. Surf film festivals now form a global network with their own industrial nodes (Iordanova 2015). These nodes are often closely related to the political economy of surfing industries and other leisure and lifestyle industries. The festivals are also markets in which alternative forms of film exhibition and distribution take place. For Iordanova, "the importance of the film festival as a node in the cinema production and distribution cycle is becoming increasingly recognized by all stakeholders involved in the

festival operation, from board members to filmmakers, producers, and critics" (9). This is also true of the hierarchy of surf film festivals within their sub-circuit of the festival archipelago (56).

However, surf film festivals have cores and peripheries, just as mainstream film festivals do, with the core festivals often driven to a greater extent by commerce (Peranson 2002). For example, the large-scale political economy of surfing industries, and many of its films, is based on product placement for lifestyle clothing companies, wetsuit manufacturers, surfboard producers, and a host of other brands which advertise through subcultural media (Booth 2017). Such industries can be described as the industrial nodes of surf filmmaking. These sometimes exist alongside more conventional nodes, such as large-scale cinema distributors, or films funded by state bodies. The surf film festivals which lie at the centre of this paradigm, such as London (within the European context) have the capacity to attract the most influential film releases, and a larger range of commercial sponsors. For example, the 2023 London Surf Film Festival was supported by Finisterre (a British lifestyle clothing and wetsuit manufacturer), Northcore (a major British surf accessory manufacturer), YETI (a major American manufacturer of outdoor products), Huckmag (a magazine, website and video platform), and Surfline (a major global surf forecasting and news website), amongst others.

If London is at the core of European surf film festival network, then Irish surf film festivals remain relatively peripheral in terms of national and international exposure. Whilst they are not small events, Irish surf film festivals are less influenced by the financial capital at the disposal of festivals such as London. Ireland has not yet become a financially important centre for surf and adventure film exhibition, or for major distributors awaiting to release films on streaming networks, primarily because Ireland's population

centres lie in spaces where surfing is a peripheral activity. This small-scale economy has resulted in Irish surf film festivals remaining community-based, centered around a relatively small group of surfing practitioners and attendees. Festivals such as "Shore Shots" are not built within economies of scale, and their networks are also not necessarily defined by revenue generation. For example, although the 2013 "Shore Shots" festival was sponsored by the aforementioned major American energy drink, Monster Energy, which utilises action sports as a means to market its product, it was also sponsored by Clean Coasts, an Irish organisation "which works with communities to help protect and care for Ireland's waterways, coastline, seas, ocean and marine life" (Clean Coasts 2024), and Shells Seaside Bakery Café in Strandhill, County Sligo. Later iterations of the festival included sponsorship from the now defunct surf forecaster Magicseaweed.com and companies such as the Wicklow Wolf brewing company, the White hag brewing company, and Teelings whiskey, which was founded in 2015. Some sponsors have in fact been anti-industrial in tone, such as Fair Seas Ireland.

Films are also generally not bought or sold for distribution at Irish surf film festivals, instead being screened for audiences to appreciate their technical and aesthetic qualities, or the skills of the surfers in the films. As Mark Peranson states, "this marks a key difference from the norm-setting, major international film festivals, which have distributors, buyers, sales agents, and sponsors as their primary interest groups" (Peranson 2008, 39). As a result, surf film festivals represent an authentic iteration of film festival culture, mirroring the foundational characteristics of major film festivals before their sweeping "professionalisation and commercialisation" (De Valck 2016). Irish surf film festivals are thus a form of alternative cinema, which both shares and rejects many of the commercial tendencies present in both mainstream film festival culture, and in broader surf

film festival culture. Consequently, these festivals offer social capital and symbolic value within the subcultural community, rather than any economic capital of scale.

Loist notes that changes in the development of film festival circuit and networks have "always been marked by complex shifts in film culture, writ large" (60). This has resulted in the move from a traditional idea of a film festival as the display of national film art, to an "ever broader spectrum of festivals and programming strategies" (ibid). Irish surf film festivals form a part of this ever-broader spectrum. The wider growth of film festival culture as a means of exhibition in Ireland means that non-traditional routes of film production can maintain exhibition and distribution outlets through an archipelago of alternative circuits and networks. A variety of smaller networks now exist in the global archipelago to serve lifestyle specific audiences and subcultural forms of genre cinema (rock climbing film festivals, snow sports film festivals), of which Irish surf films are part of.

For Irish surf film festivals - and other niche filmmaking festivals which exist outside of mainstream cinematic exhibition and distribution - festival exhibition can be "recast within the celebratory framework of a cultural event", offering an alternative to traditional modes of exhibition practice' (Stevens 2011, 144). These networks often deviate from the conventional paradigm of feature film distribution, creating their own niche market nodes. One recent example of the success of this form of alternative distribution in the genre of Irish surf films is *Keep it a Secret* (Sean Duggan 2022). Produced entirely by Irish American Sean Duggan, this film toured a variety of mostly niche subcultural, lifestyle based, and diasporic festivals (alongside some mainstream festivals such as DIFF and BIFF) for more than a year before its eventual screening on RTE television (and its housing on the RTE player). The film was screened at the Irish

Surf Film Festival in Galway in 2023, almost 2 years after its initial release.[61] This alternative system of film festival distribution allowed the film to gain traction and generate buzz before its eventual release at a national level, which highlights that there are distinct connections between the disparate islands of the film festival archipelago.

8.6 - Surf Film Festivals, Film Cultures, and Spaces of Flow

Niche film festivals such as surf film festivals are often representative of specific "film cultures" (Harbord 2002), which have their own symbolic meanings and their own distinct forms of cultural politics, aesthetics, generic tendencies, and modes of storytelling. For example, this can broadly be understood in the opposing film cultures of mainstream industrial film production and Avant Garde film production. Janet Harbord argues that sites of exhibition and film festivals have direct "spatial effects" which influence the film cultures in question. Harbord states that this form of analysis "is a reworking of what and how we might think about and analyse film, not as the scrutiny of texts or studies of audience behaviour, but as a practice embedded in spatial and psychological contexts of social hierarchy and distinction" (2002, 2).

As has been described in the chapter on their subcultural politics, Irish surf films are rooted within their own "film culture" with distinct subcultural meanings, representations, spaces, and aesthetic tendencies. It is important to recognise Irish surf films as representative of a distinct filmmaking culture, because film cultures are "social practices, materially rooted and connected to larger networks of exchange and flow" (56). Harbord specifically refers to the difference between mainstream and arthouse film cultures but these practices can be observed in Irish and global surf filmmaking. They can

[61] In another such example, Ken O'Sullivan's 2007 surf film *Sea Fever* won the cinematography award at the Moscow Sports Film Festival in 2008.

also be seen in the growth of surf film festivals as key "spaces of flow" for subcultural exhibition in Ireland and around the world. As has been noted, surf film festivals also act as markets serving the industrial nodes of this film culture.

Janet Harbord argues that such film cultures are institutionally and spatially located. This can be understood in the differences between the film texts which are screened in multiplex cinemas, arthouse cinemas, and art galleries, which maintain their own film cultures. Irish surf film festivals are a prime example of a film culture with its own spatially located forms and networks of circulation, having become strongly associated with spaces of the west coast of Ireland, both in the content of Irish surf films and in the locations of Irish surf film festivals (excluding the first 3 years of the "Shore Shots" festival). Harbord proposed that "the context of exhibition contributes to the social value of film cultures. In the exploration of these sites, certain formal aesthetic traditions adhere to film texts more strongly than others" (2002, 39). The specific aesthetic characteristics of the Irish surf filmmaking culture in explored in chapter seven.

Film festivals are ultimately of great importance to how film cultures sustain their communities. Harbord argues that film festivals provide for film cultures that would otherwise remain marginalized by dominant industrial cinemas (2016, 88-89). She also states that film festivals operate routes of distribution where each autonomous site belongs to a series of nodes that secure the circulation of the films across national territories; meaning that they have a transnational quality (ibid), as Iordanova has also described (2015). Thirdly, film festivals place films into the realm of public culture, which can be discussed and debated in semi structured environments (2016, 89). Finally, Harbord shows that festivals are tied to place, becoming part of the calendar of local rituals that "perform and enact the specific nature and appeal of a location for both inhabitants and visitors"

(2016, 89). Irish surf film festivals have yet to be staged in one location long enough to become a permanent calendar fixture, but Harbord's spatial effects are, as mentioned, clearly associated with coastal spaces in the west of Ireland. Indeed, Galway City Council support for the 2023 and 2024 iterations of the Irish Surf Film Festival suggests that these festivals may result in a long-term association with place, space, and the inevitable tourism, however minor, that a consistent annual film festival may attract.

8.7 - Surf Film Festivals, Subcultural Capital, Taste and Cultural Legitimisation

This chapter has shown that Irish surf film festivals are tied to a specific niche film culture, and that this culture has created subcultural and lifestyle-based networks which have resulted in a transnational festival sub-circuit. However, one of the most useful ways to analyse the role of capital in niche festivals is to understand them in terms of their association with symbolic value and subcultural capital. As described in earlier chapters, subcultural capital plays an important role in the distribution of taste, distinction, and meaning within Irish surf filmmaking. This section will expand on this concept in relation to the field of cultural production, with particular reference to the theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and film and media scholar Marijke De Valck. As has been mentioned previously in this chapter, it is already an established idea in the study of film festivals that "many festival films are atypical niche products that depend to a large extent on discursive framing, embedding in a sociocultural context and persistence in acquiring tastes" (De Valck 2008, 9) and that acquiring social capital is often more important than economic capital for some (2008). Niche festivals such as "Shore Shots" and The Irish Surf Film Festival also play a key role in cultivating taste and acting as sites of cultural legitimisation within – and beyond - their filmmaking culture (2016).

Bourdieu's influence on the study of political economy stems from his influential theories of cultural capital, social capital, symbolic value, and the habitus, which emanate from his seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). Bourdieu's encapsulates his position in his introduction to the text:

> There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic. Sociology endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods, and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate (Bourdieu 1984, 1).

Any application of Bourdieu's concepts may seem contrary to "strong" forms of political economy (O'Regan 2008) which regard the cultural and social agency of individuals as secondary factors to purely economic forms of analysis. This thesis has argued that this "strong" approach to political economy denies the broadest possible range of analysis within the theory. The reason for this is that the meaning produced by texts (and events) is often of great importance to their political economy. Anna Leader (2001) rejects the hard interpretation of political economy in a review of Bourdieu's *The Social Structures of the Economy* (2005) for the "Review of International Political Economy". Leader argues for the relevance of Bourdieu's approach because…

> his 'frontal attack on economics' is useful for IPE scholars because it spells out and demonstrates the application of an approach, which has the virtue of sharing traditional concerns of IPE scholars with (1) empirical economic reality as opposed to abstract modelling; and (2) with the structural power inherent in this reality. But, in addition to this, Bourdieu's approach lays more weight on (3) critical scholarship and above all reflexivity, than has so far been common in our subject (2001, 343-344).

Bourdieu utilises reflexivity to explore empirical realities as a means to understand the kinds of socio-cultural dynamics that economic theory ignores, arguing that many economic theories are developed without concern for reality, which results in

"parsimonious and general theorizing" (345). Leander points out that "one of Bourdieu's main criticisms of economists is that they exclude the important part of what goes on in the economy by assumption" (ibid). In this sense, economists take the interests of individual actors and the social conditions of their interaction for granted. But for Leander, "it is precisely the formation of the rules of the game, of interests and of identities that gives shape to social reality" (347). Leander elaborates, stating that:

> Actors do not slavishly behave according to dispositions given by the social structure and their field. Rather, the habitus is a collection of dispositions partly derived from the structure but also partly from personal experience. The habitus makes actors likely to behave in appropriate ways in view of their own circumstance (348).

Marijke De Valck (2016) notes that Czach (2004), De Valck and Soeteman (2010) and Elsaesser (2005) have all turned to Bourdieu to understand festivals as sites of cultural legitimisation. De Valck applies Bourdieu's theories to film festivals and their symbolic value, stating that in order to comprehend the ontology of film festivals, it is important to focus on them as sites of exhibition and to determine what sets them apart from other modes of screening and watching films. De Valck utilises a cultural sociological approach to elucidate structures and principles underlying the existence and dynamics of an exhibition circuit composed of film festivals, and this can also be applied to Irish surf film festivals. For example, in the case of Irish surf film festivals, what differentiates festival screenings from theatrical releases? Are the films at surf film festivals appreciated differently when shown elsewhere? How does a festival circuit influence a filmmaker and their aesthetic direction? In the case of the examples in this chapter, why do filmmakers choose to display their films if there is little potential commercial trade involved?

De Valck suggests that a Bourdieusian analysis of the economics of film festivals should begin with the field of cultural production. For Bourdieu, a cultural field can be regarded as "a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities" (Danaher, Schirato and Webb 2002, 21). A cultural field can also be determined by the conflicts which occur when groups or individuals "attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field, and how that capital is to be distributed" (ibid). Secondly, a Bourdieusian analysis should focus on the role of capital, or how value is conferred on the relevant films. As Harker, Mahar and Wilkes describe…

> the definition of capital is very wide for Bourdieu and includes material things (which can have symbolic value), as well as 'untouchable' but culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority (referred to as symbolic capital), along with cultural capital (defined as culturally valued taste and consumption patterns). For Bourdieu, capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange, and the term is extended to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation (Harker et al 1990, 1).

De Valck also suggests the analysis should consider the specific habitus of the filmmakers, and their socio-cultural relationship with the relevant festivals. For example, can it be argued that Irish surf film festivals cultural consecration of certain films sustains the system of cultural legitimisation at festivals, by producing filmmakers who make films specifically for festival circuits and cultivating audiences?

Following this framework, it can be seen that the cultural field of surf film festivals relates to the subculture of surfing, the production culture of surf filmmaking, lifestyle industries, and the interrelated relationship with lifestyle tourism and these industries. The subcultural field of surf culture has its own distinct histories, meanings,

values, principles, and tastes, just as can be seen in the broader political and economic fields, or religious and scientific fields. Bourdieu broadly divides the cultural field into subfields of restricted production, and large-scale production, of which Irish surf film festivals fall into the former category. De Valck notes that "restricted or small-scale production – or what can be described as the opposite of an economy of scale – has a relatively large degree of autonomy" (2016, 101) in terms of its modes of cultural production.

When understood in terms of Irish surf films and festivals, this can be regarded in a variety of ways. For example, most Irish surf films require no exhibition certification from the Irish film censor as they are mostly not screened in Irish cinemas, or released for home viewing. This avoids significant costs. Incredibly given the risks involved, most Irish surf films also lack the insurance costs that professional mainstream film productions also incur. There are also relatively few major commercial interests involved in the production of many Irish surf films, or surf film festivals. Even where commercial interests are involved, direct commercial intervention is minimal. This can be seen in Finisterre's sponsorship of the 2023 The Irish Surf Film Festival, which greatly benefitted the staging of the event and involved very little direct influence over events. This arguably results in greater independence and freedom of expression amongst surf filmmakers. Rather than a political economy driven by commercial interests, De Valck and Bourdieu show that in small-scale production (or subcultural production), achievements are assessed and careers made in reference to the aesthetic norms of the subcultural community (ibid). Alternately, in large scale film or screen production, such as Hollywood, or the contemporary Irish screen industries, the profitability of the product may potentially outweigh aesthetic considerations.

However, neither small scale nor large scale production are fixed categories, "but rather…poles on a sliding scale, each characterized by a different principle of hierarchization: the autonomous principle for restricted production, and the heteronomous principle for large scale production" (ibid). Within the autonomous principle, there is internal hierarchisation, whilst the heteronomous principle involves external hierarchisation which involves the importation of values from outside fields, in particular the economic realm (ibid). De Valck elaborates:

> At this pole, cultural products are considered not so different from other goods in the marketplace; they are measured on their commercial success and acquisition of economic capital. However, at the autonomous pole, prestige is linked to appreciation by peers or experts within the field it; subcultural capital. Poets, in this vein, are made by their peers, not a general public (101).

Such autonomy endows agency on the creators of film festivals such as "Shore Shots" and The Irish Surf Film Festival, which is problematic for hard interpretations of political economy. For most Irish surf films, there will be no wider cinema release whereby costs are recouped. Films are screened for cultural, or subcultural reasons and although money is clearly involved through the sponsorship of lifestyle companies such as Monster Energy, or the Finisterre clothing brand, surf festival exhibition remains predominantly tied to autonomous modes of production and organisation.

Following an analysis of the cultural field, a Bourdieusian analysis of the role of capital in film festivals shows that economic, social, and symbolic capital all play a role in taste and social distinction, particularly at niche film festivals such as Irish surf and adventure film festivals. Capital provides "a theory of different rewards that drive social agents" within the cultural field (2016: 104). Within this system, social agents are driven

by personal gain and a desire to occupy the best position in their social field. Bourdieu and Wacquant state that:

> A general science of the economy of practices that does not artificially limit itself to those practices that are socially recognised as economic must endeavor to grasp capital, in all of its different forms, and to uncover the laws that regulate their conversion from one into another (1992, 118).

To grasp these ideas of capital, this position requires an understanding of the cultural politics of any particular cultural field. Within a Bourdieusian perspective, capital exists in a variety of interrelated forms. Economic capital relates to money, assets, and economic resources. Social capital involves access to resources based on networks and relationships. Cultural capital is informed by a person's status, and is formed by knowledge, skills, education, attitude and taste. Finally, symbolic capital is based on resources related to prestige, honour, and recognition. This is what Bourdieu describes as "the energy of social physics" (Bourdieu 1990, 122). Within the social physics of surf film festivals and other subcultural and niche festivals, symbolic capital is often a key driver of their political economy, which provides social and cultural capital within the subculture. By means of illustration, De Valck provides the example of Avant Garde artists who may show disdain for economic capital but pursue the symbolic capital that offers them prestige in their restricted field of cultural production (2016, 105).

Film festivals can therefore be understood as spaces where filmmakers and films – and in this case surfers - can acquire symbolic capital. At surf and adventure film festivals, this symbolic capital can relate to the technical and physical abilities of surfers caught on film, the surfing of the biggest waves, or the quality of a film's aesthetics. For surf filmmakers and photographers, symbolic capital can be gained through the capacity to get the shots of the heaviest waves and best surfers in the most 'authentic' settings.

Contemporary film festivals are therefore part of niche or "shadow" economies (Lobato, 2012) that may even replicate the Hollywood blockbuster and star model on a smaller scale with far more modest budgets. For example, well known figures form Irish surf films such as Noah Lane, Easkey Britton, and Gearoid McDaid could be described as some of stars of these festivals as they feature in numerous films that have been screened at them. In essence, money "does not constitute the key asset driving the people involved…they main capital involved is symbolic based on prestige, honour and recognition" (2016, 105).

Can symbolic/social capital be turned into economic capital? Are surf film festivals stepping stones to a wider film release? De Valck argues that festival acclaim is a prerequisite for art cinema distribution but that many films screened at niche festivals have no circulation outside the festival world, and many films may not even bestow symbolic capital. This is not necessarily true of Irish surf films, and of films in the larger surf film festival circuit. Most festival entries at surf and adventure films do not seek wider cinema distribution, but they do have immediate access to online streaming through websites such as YouTube, Vimeo and The Surf Network. There is also a tendency for some films to be released on increasingly larger streaming platforms. Amazon Prime, for example, streams both *Into the Sea*, starring Easkey Britton, and *The Crest* (Mark Corvino 2017).

The final element of this analysis which interrelates with Bourdieu's ideas of the cultural field and cultural capital is the habitus. The habitus can be understood as:

> The values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts (they are durable and transposable). These values and dispositions allow us to respond to cultural rules and contexts in a variety of ways (because they allow for improvisations), but the responses are always largely determined—regulated—by where (and who) we have been in a culture (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 36).

This is relevant in the study of film festivals because artists compete for and take up "positions on the basis of two important structures: the objective structures (the field and its institutions) which make positions available; and the incorporated structures (the habitus), which predisposes individuals to enter the field" (De Valck 2016, 173). What role does the habitus play in events such as Irish surf film festivals? How does a festival habitus influence the behaviours of filmmakers? As noted in previous sections, Irish surf film festivals, alongside other major surf film festivals, act as industry nodes, cultural gatekeepers, and as "tastemakers" in the subcultural field of surf culture. The notion of habitus can explain the dynamics behind this taste making. For example, judges at surf film festivals are generally chosen from within the surfing community, rather than the cultural field of film production or film criticism.

The habitus refers to an unconscious functioning of systems, rules, categories, laws and values in society. This can be regarded as what people take to be common sense values, which are "in fact a largely arbitrary set of arrangements held up by the beliefs and practices of people" (109). The habitus can also be analysed through an understanding of the cultural politics of any given cultural field in order to understand its structural logic. In *The Rules of Art* (1996), Bourdieu applies this critique to his study of the literary field and its relationship with capital. Bourdieu suggests that the literary field organises itself according to "two independent and hierarchized principles of differentiation: the principal opposition, between pure production destined for a market restricted to producers, and large-scale production, orientated towards the satisfaction of the demands of a wide audience" (121). This suggests that different forms of habitus develop according to associations with different forms of cultural production, and this idea can be applied to the study of film festivals at both major and niche ends of the spectrum.

The cultivated habitus can help to create what Bourdieu describes as cultural legitimisation. It has already been argued that "for circuits outside the mainstream film industries, film festivals occupy nodal roles in both instances, as gatekeepers and as tastemakers" (De Valck 2016,109). The reason for this gatekeeping function stems from the "objective structures filmmakers have to 'pass' within festivals in order to find exposure (exhibition opportunities), recognition (assessed as worthy enough to be shown), and ideally also prestige (selection for prizes)" (ibid). Film festivals are also part of the incorporated structures that contribute to upholding the belief in art cinema's autonomous values and thus to continuous production and reproduction of the "game" of art cinema (Bourdieu 1993, 167).

Surf film festivals also play this role by cultivating and selecting films which reproduce the "game" of surf filmmaking, and this plays a role in the construction and form of the Irish surf film genre. Surf film festivals therefore 'ensure the reproduction of agents imbued with the categories of action, expression, conception, imagination, perception, specific to the "cultivated disposition"' (Bourdieu 1996: 121). Because certain aesthetic ideas of surf filmmaking are "continuously confirmed" by their selection and exhibition at festivals, "filmmakers are predisposed to produce films in certain traditions and for the festival exhibition circuit" (De Valck 2016, 110). Festivals are therefore according to Bourdieu part of "a system for reproducing the producers of a determinate type of cultural goods, and the consumer capable of consuming them" (1996: 121). Irish surf film festivals also cultivate taste, arguably helping to produce the consumers capable of consuming the goods (films) that are screened at the festivals. De Valck even suggests that certain filmmakers fulfil the habitus of particular film festivals, suggesting Apichatpong Weerasethakul as prime example of a festival favourite on the arthouse festival circuit. This idea can also be applied to the Irish and international surf film festival

circuit, where Mickey Smith's influential aesthetic has become a standard in the Irish surf film genre.

The relationship between cultural capital, the cultural field, and the role of the habitus in cultivating taste is central to understanding the political economy of Irish, and international, surf film festivals. This relatively new niche festival circuit now plays a key role in how value in conferred on surf films, and how taste is cultivated by the genre. The conferring of value through the cultural legitimisation of surf film texts occurs through their association with these festivals. The existence of surf film festivals provides cultural legitimisation to Irish surf films through their validation as a form of cinematic practice and their contribution to a cultivated disposition that "produces and reproduces both the filmmakers creating the films screened on the festival circuit and the audience which watch them" (De Valck 2016, 112). Festival competition is also central to this form of cultural legitimisation because the gatekeepers and tastemakers of the surfing community can bestow value on certain texts. In another mimesis of mainstream filmmaking convention, surf films also display their festival credentials on film posters and marketing for their films in order to display the value conferred upon them by festival selection or prize winning. As the "most tangible form of symbolic capital" (106), prizes and awards at surf film festivals act as regulators of the subcultural field of cultural production.

8.8 - Conclusion

This chapter has shown that surf film festivals play a vital role in sustaining the visibility and circulation of Irish surf films, particularly short-form edits. Positioned outside commercial distribution networks, these festivals operate as key cultural sites where films and filmmakers gain recognition through subcultural legitimacy rather than financial return. As such, they exemplify a form of exhibition rooted in community, shared subcultural politics, and cultural capital, reinforcing the alternative forms of media production explored throughout this thesis.

Bennet and Woodward (2016) have argued that festival spaces are places in which people experience a sense of inclusion, membership and belonging, a sense of shared cultural politics, and shared understandings of cultural and social capital and their associated symbolic value. Whilst all film festivals engender a sense of community, it is the subcultural surfing community itself that drives the political economy of Irish surf film festivals through participatory engagement. This chapter has described how Irish surf films are part of a distinct "film culture" with its own networks and circuits. It has shown that within the industrial nodes and networks of niche festivals and in the political economy of local, or community forms of cinema, 'success' is often measured not by economic capital, but by forms symbolic capital which confer value on their film texts. As described earlier in this chapter, Irish surf film festivals, constitute a form of informal film distribution that Ramon Lobato describes as a "shadow economy" of cinema (2012). This is representative of the diversification of the film festival circuit which has led Dina Iordanova to state that "even if the classic festival settings continue to dominate, a new generation of film festivals is dawning: festivals that take place online, focus on films shot with mobile phones or tablets, and experiment with interaction and virtual reality" (De Valck 2016, 5).

Against what could be described as the dominant and potentially hegemonic trends of mainstream and arthouse film exhibition and distribution on the island of Ireland, Irish surf films have found an alternative niche. Whilst they are not part of an Irish national

cinema, these festivals are a national iteration of a globalised subcultural network, with its own spatial networks, spaces of flow, and circuits and nodes. These exhibition cultures manifest through a system of localised screenings, (sometimes in cinemas, such as Bundoran cineplex), and in local clubs and halls. The distribution of Irish surf films is amplified on a transnational and global scale through exhibition on streaming media sites, which are widely shared, commented on, and reacted to, via participatory forms of social media. Local screenings and online forms of exhibition are complimented and cultivated by a national and international system of film festivals which provide a platform for their exhibition and promote their recognition as a legitimate form of cultural production.

This chapter has not been exhaustive. It identifies film festivals in Ireland as an under researched area of study which requires further collection of data and qualitative analysis. There are other methods by which this topic could be explored in later research, such as through empirical research based on attendees at surf film festivals, as conducted by Binnie and Klesse (2018) at the GAZE film festivals, or further analysis of the role cultural policy in the sustainability of Irish film festivals. As described in the introduction to this thesis, one reason for the lack of academic attention to local, niche, or community film festivals is because they constitute alternative ideas of 'film' and 'cinema', meaning that they do not carry the same level of cultural capital within the academic field where "residues of high/low cultural hierarchies coat academic film and media criticism" (Groening 2016).

Whilst the growth of the Irish surf film festival network has been a remarkable success story, their future is precarious. Mary McGuckin has highlighted the difficulty for Irish literary festivals to generate revenue and funding (2023), and in the case of the "Shore Shots" festival, a significant problem for the sustainability of Irish surf film

festivals will continue to be their economic viability. Bernadette Quinn argues that the success and viability of arts festivals is closely associated with their relationship with population centres such as cities and urban areas (2010), noting that festivals in urban areas encourages cultural tourism through ancillary consumers (Quinn 2010, 3). However, surfing is not an urban phenomenon in Ireland, unlike in spaces such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sydney. The intervention of a cultural policy of support could help cultivate this film culture to a greater extent, and this does appear to be happening in Galway city councils support of the 2023 and 2024 editions of 'The Irish Surf Film Festival'. The closure of the Pálás Cinema in Galway – which occurred during the writing of this thesis – will also have an effect on the sustainability of this festival.

It could be easy to dismiss surf film festivals (and other niche festivals) as representative to the growth of event capitalism or the "eventisation" of the niche film festival market which Skadi Loist (2016) and Ann Vogel (2023) associate with the rise of neo-liberal capitalism**.** Yet rather than surf film festivals being regarded as quirky niche representatives of a creeping festival apocalypse, they should be understood with the seriousness of mainstream festivals within the context of their subcultural field. As cinema audiences drop in Ireland and around the world, "the event programming structure of the festival stands to usurp the role of traditional theatres, emerging as the premiere platform for non-mainstream film exhibition" (147). The Irish film festival circuit is clearly able to support a multitude of events as alternative and parallel networks to mainstream film exhibition practices in Ireland, existing harmoniously beside each other, and often unaware of each other's existence. For Kristen Stevens, the future of new digital cinemas relies on festivals as a specific viewing experience that merges culture and entertainment to produce a revolutionized temporary "museum of artistic filmmaking" (146). In the absence of a national archive of Irish surf cinema, or any major national retrospectives, Irish surf film

festivals fulfill a similar remit as temporary museums of a subculturally distinct form of cinema.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

This thesis has built on theoretical concepts discussed in chapter one to provide an analysis of the political economy of Irish surf films. Chapter two highlighted the unique subcultural politics that exists in the culture of Irish surf filmmaking, which are essential to understanding the discourses that drive their political economy. Chapter three noted the growth of an autonomous subcultural form in the early 2000s with its own modes of production and distribution. Chapter four analysed the funding models involved in the production of publicly funded Irish surf feature films. Chapter five examined the role of crowdfunding as a financial model for the production of Irish surf films. Chapter six analysed the emergence of the short surf films known as edits by providing an analysis of their varied funding models and highlighting their relative autonomy in cultural production. Chapter seven assessed the role of surf film festivals in the production and exhibition of Irish surf films. The conclusion reflects on the relative autonomy of Irish surf films from mainstream economies of media production in Ireland and how further states how these forms of production are problematic for dominant interpretations of the political economy of media.

The aim of this thesis was to thoroughly analyse the production, exhibition, and distribution of surf films in Ireland, and to answer fundamental questions about their political economy. In order to consider these films from key theoretical perspectives in the political economy of media, I applied a broad variety of methodologies inspired by theorists such as Graham Murdock, Peter Golding, Vincent Mosco, and Janet Wasko. I offered alternative perspectives to these theories by employing critiques by Nicolas Garnham and Paul Dwyer to show that dominant theoretical interpretations of the political economy of media failed to explain the forms of production, distribution and exhibition in the culture of Irish surf filmmaking. My approach was rooted in Frank Stilwell's description of the political economy approach in economics, which he argues should provide analytical descriptions of the role of markets and ideology in expressions of social, political, and economic capital (38-42). This perspective led the thesis to a critical position concerned with the "cultural politics of cinema" (O'Regan 2008, 246), with a specific emphasis on the subcultural field of Irish surf filmmaking. The analysis employed textual

and contextual analysis to examine the films in terms of their aesthetics, representation, generic elements, and their relationship with Ireland and Irish culture, heritage, and identity. Underpinning the examination of production, distribution and exhibition in this thesis is Mosco's mantra that political economy should represent the study of "social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources" (2009, 24) in any given market economy.

To balance the potential breadth and depth of this study, I moved between case studies of key films and film festivals, alongside the analysis of socio-historical trends in the production of Irish surf films. It was important to prove socio-historical detail, particularly in chapter three, because the subject lacked any written history either within the subculture, or in academia. The correct approach to the application of political economy must incorporate an understanding of historical realities. To theorise without understanding the history of a given topic would not provide the reader or the analyst with an understanding of the discourses that create the 'problem' in the first place.[62] Because of the potential breadth of the work, the thesis also had to exclude the work of many filmmakers, such as the films of Chris Case (*Of Viking Minds, Martial Narrative*), and Sean Duggan's *Keep it a Secret*, which is another example of crowdfunded surf documentary.

9.1 - Key Findings

In assessing the wide variety of Irish surf films produced since 2002, it became clear that the most consistently repeated and repeatable form was the short Irish surf film. Short Irish surf films - or "edits" - fall within the category of "pure", or subcultural, surf

[62] This topic is explored by Michel Foucault in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). The 'problem' being "what are Irish surf films"?

films. They can be regarded as a genre because they have repeated and repeatable aesthetic and thematic characteristics. These films are historically connected to the earliest forms of amateur and professional subcultural surf filmmaking that emerged in the United States in the late 1950s. Since their inception, subcultural surf films were part of an autonomous form of industrial political economy which existed outside mainstream forms of film production and distribution. They were also reflective of a form of filmmaking that emerged from leisure practices, rather than exploitative labour. Short Irish surf films maintain these autonomous characteristics.

Each chapter in this thesis has shown that a confluence of novel techno-economic factors has enabled the emergence of an independent culture of surf filmmaking in Ireland. This includes the widespread use of the DSLR and action cameras (and now drones) in the production of surf films, and the use of social media and video hosting platforms in their exhibition and distribution. Short Irish surf films also utilise community-based film festivals as a means of distribution. These changes allowed this form of filmmaking to coalesce into an indigenous generic form around 2010, spurred by the viral success of *Dark Side of the Lens*. This form of filmmaking is a youth driven participatory, regional, community-based, form of collaborative filmmaking.

One of the central conceptual findings of this work lies in the problematic rigidity of key theories of the political economy of media. Most surf films produced in Ireland since 2010 are produced within small-scale semi-amateur subcultural industry in which social and cultural capital are the dominant forms of capital in exchange, rather than economic capital. Irish surf films have value for the community of surfers and creators that produce and consume them. This value does not lie in financial gain, but in subcultural capital. These films frame the lifestyle activity of surfing as a part of the contemporary

heritage of Ireland, offering new interpretations of Irish culture, landscapes and identities (as described in chapters 2 to 6). This form of filmmaking is rooted in youth-based creativity and a largely regional community form of participatory, collaborative filmmaking which engages with a global online audience.

Chapter one introduced the subject and provided an overview of the aims and goals of the work. Chapter two provided an analysis of the idea of political economy in classical economics and an examination of the conceptual application of the theory of political economy in film, media, and communication studies. This chapter described the conceptual frameworks within which Irish surf films could be considered. It emphasised the importance of regarding Irish surf films as commodities which can be analysed within a highly localized and global economy and market. The aim of this chapter was to outline a range of approaches to the political economy of media in order to provide clarity regarding the various interpretations of the theory. It concluded that so called "strong" and "weak" approaches to the theoretical application of political economy should be integrated. It argued that "strong" applications of the theory are too rigid, because they minimise the level of autonomy and agency that video creators and filmmakers can attain because of an overemphasis on media as structurally dominant forms of capitalism.

Chapter three introduced the highly specific subcultural politics of Irish surf films. The conceptual importance of this chapter lay in its ability to describe the social and cultural power relations at play in the production cultures of Irish surf filmmaking. The chapter considered economic differences in the production of Mickey Smith's *Dark Side of the Lens*, and Andrew Kaineder's *Beyond the Noise.* It emphasised the autonomous qualities of both films, and the wider production of surf films in Ireland. This chapter established the aesthetic tendencies in subcultural Irish surf films and described the representation of Ireland in indigenous and exogenous surf films. This showed how Ireland

has come to represent a frontier space within surf culture. This chapter also established the variety of economic frameworks which underpin the production of surf films in Ireland.

Chapter four provided a socio-historical analysis of the emergence of surf films in Ireland throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, describing key texts such as *Eye of the Storm*, *The Silver Surfari*, *Sea Fever*, *From Shadows,* and *Waking Maeve*. These films were progenitors of the short online surf films that would come to dominate the market after 2010. The chapter described the highly autonomous, independent, and pre-existing subcultural market by which surf films were predominantly distributed on VHS and DVD through surf shops. This chapter also described how this market gradually moved towards forms of online distribution and the importance of publicly funded broadcasting in the distribution of early Irish surf films.

Chapter five examined the role of public funding in the production of two feature length Irish surf films, *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea*. These films are arguably the most well-known Irish surf films among the Irish and international public. However, their production differs significantly from the way most subcultural Irish surf films were produced and funded since 2002. Unlike the majority of independent grassroots surf films, *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea* were supported by significant amounts of public funding, making them noteworthy exceptions within the genre. Their inclusion in this analysis is particularly relevant because the funding they received reflects a transition in the recognition of surfing as an integral part of modern Irish culture and heritage. Despite their distinct funding sources, the chapter found that both films were heavily influenced by the aesthetics and storytelling techniques of subcultural surf filmmaking

Chapter six examined the role of crowdfunding in the production of *Into the Sea* and *The Crest*, two very different films that represent the broad spectrum within which

Irish surf films can be considered. Alongside textual analysis, this chapter explored how these two documentary films exemplify the diverse ways in which Irish surf films are financed and produced. A key focus of the analysis was the concept of autonomous economies, and the chapter demonstrated how both films utilised crowdfunding as an alternative to traditional funding models. This financial approach provided creative control and independence to the filmmakers, whilst also fostering a direct connection with their audiences. Additionally, the chapter highlighted how emerging technological and economic changes—such as digital platforms and social media—have reshaped the landscape of independent filmmaking, enabling projects like *Into the Sea* and *The Crest* to secure funding and reach wider audiences through grassroots support.

Chapter seven provided an overview of the most prevalent form of Irish surf filmmaking over the last 15 years - the short Irish surf film. This genre has become the dominant mode of surf film production in Ireland and is characterised by its accessibility, artistic freedom, and an inherent connection to surf communities. The chapter examined case studies which illustrate the different approaches to production and funding within this genre, such as *Dark Side of the Lens*, *Run to the Sea*, and Alice Ward's *Ebb and Flow*. The chapter explored the diverse ways in which short Irish surf films are made, highlighting the role of community based collaboratively and creativity and non-traditional funding models. It also described the aesthetic tendency toward "radical delirium" which underlies the economies of the films.

A central focus of chapter seven was the concept of autonomous economies within short Irish surf filmmaking, and the notion that their productions are based in leisure, rather than historical ideas of labour. Unlike feature-length productions that often rely on public or commercial funding, these short films are largely sustained by creative

communities. Their production is driven more by social and cultural capital than by significant financial investment. This reliance on shared knowledge, "craft based" production skills, and resources allows filmmakers to maintain creative control while fostering a strong sense of community and artistic identity within Irish surf culture. Ultimately, this model of production underscores how short Irish surf films thrive within an ecosystem where personal passions, storytelling, and visual artistry hold more value than commercial profitability

Chapter eight examined the emergence of Irish surf film festivals which now play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining Ireland's surf filmmaking culture. The chapter described the establishment of the "Shore Shots" Surf Film Festival in 2013, held at the Lighthouse Cinema in Dublin, as a key moment in the institutionalisation and legitimisation of Irish surf cinema. These festivals provide a dedicated space for showcasing surf films, fostering creative networks, and strengthening nodal connections within the surf filmmaking community. Building on the discussions in previous chapters, this chapter explored how surf film festivals operate within small-scale economies and subcultural markets. Like short Irish surf films, these festivals thrive not through large-scale financial backing but through the social and cultural capital generated within their communities. Their existence is sustained by participatory grassroots networks, independent filmmakers, and surf enthusiasts who contribute to the festivals through participation, collaboration, and shared values rather than commercial profit motives. By providing a platform for independent filmmakers, surf film festivals reinforce the cultural significance of surf filmmaking in Ireland, ensuring the continuing growth of the subcultural genre and provide visibility despite limited financial resources.

9.2 - Autonomous Creativity and the Role of the Amateur in Political Economy

This thesis proposes greater flexibility in theoretical interpretations and applications of critical political economy of media. This would allow greater scope in the study of both industrial media and public policy, but it would also cater for alternative film and media that sit outside these paradigms. In an era of ubiquitous media production, there should be renewed attention to creative and industrial autonomy within specific production cultures. This approach should include situational (socio-historic) and aesthetic analyses of media alongside financial and economic practices. At the core of this debate is the possibility that artists can retain a level of creative agency and industrial autonomy over their creations, instead of merely serving as compliant contributors within vast capitalist structures or within public systems of funding. Subcultural Irish surf films represent an independent, vertically integrated economy, but in contemporary Irish screen production, this trend is not limited to surf filmmaking. Autonomous economies can be seen in a recent growth in Irish amateur film production, such as the No WIFI Collective in County Wicklow, who also utilise video hosting platforms as a means to distribute and exhibit their work (Galvin 2024).

As argued in chapter two, political economy should "depart from the assumption that the media should be analysed, 'first and foremost', as industrial and commercial organizations" (Dwyer 2015: 1000). By enabling small producers to compete by finding audiences, the internet has fundamentally altered traditional relationships in media production, distribution and exhibition. Yet even Paul Dwyer's specifically refers to the vertical disintegration of mainstream industrial media production rather than small scale, amateur, community-based forms of participatory filmmaking. Amateur production seems

to fall through the cracks of political economy of media almost entirely, precisely because it is problematic.

A renewed emphasis in political economy of media on amateur forms of film production can show that non-traditional pathways to film production allow artists to retain agency in a way that was historically associated with the autonomy of art. The relationship between art and autonomy is of great relevance, because what was once historically regarded as a "somewhat autonomous art realm" is now largely only critically considered in terms of its relationship with the "creative industries" (Lutticken 2022, 8).[63] Yet autonomy represents a level of freedom from critical paradigms regarding art in academia (9). Nicholas Brown points out that "the assertion of aesthetic autonomy is in itself a political assertion" and that this can be regarded as a "rejection of mainstream ways of doing things" (30). This does not grant immunity from capitalist processes, but short Irish surf films do represent an alternative mode of production from that of mainstream screen industries in Ireland. Because there is little to gain financially from producing a short surf film, this subculture confers value in social and cultural capital for the community of surfers, photographers and filmmakers who produce them. Recognising that such autonomous amateur practices are rooted in leisure, rather than labour, places creative autonomy at the core of their production. In addressing the motivations of the amateur in the creation of contemporary online videos, Stephen Groening could in fact be describing many Irish surf films when he notes that:

> This sense of amateurism (as 'a lover of') might help us to think more clearly about online videos, which are marked by a significant number of users who are so 'in love' with the form they themselves feel compelled to practice it. The amateur is therefore an experimenter, someone aware of, but not bound by, professional conventions and protocols; this freedom to ignore conventions results in formal and technical

[63] Lutticken notes that academic scholarship has also been pushed in this direction by funding earmarked for research into/collaboration with creative industries.

> experimentation as well as the production of new genres and types that other amateurs emulate. (2016).

Groening equally highlights the role of video sharing sites in the relationship between amateur cinematic practices and online video aesthetics:

> Videosharing sites have produced new aesthetic protocols, new modes of appreciation that may overlap with, but exist alongside, those of cinematic production. The networked and online nature of videosharing sites is precisely what gives rise to many of these communities, whose members would not have come into contact in any other way (ibid).

Given the scepticism with which some political economists of media regard the liberating potential of the internet and new technologies, it is ironic that Marx himself philosophised about the democratic potential of future technologies in the *Grundrisse*: *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*.[64] Marx speculated in "The Fragment on Machines" on the future role of machinery and technology on the capitalist system of production (1993, 690-695). Whilst Marx was rightly concerned about the role of automated machinery in capitalist societies, he felt that it might one day be liberating for humanity, resulting in increased free time (or leisure) because labour would be reduced to a minimum. This can be understood in the technologies that allow for the production of surf films. Regardless of his personal scepticism, Graham Murdock has also hypothesized about the positive role of online media "to forge a new relationship between expertise and lay knowledge, amateur and professional creativity" (2011, 36).

Even before the internet, surf movies maintained an autonomous quality. Surf cinema emerged from amateur filmmaking in the 1950s and retains this a 'do-it-yourself' aesthetic to this day. Bud Browne (and others) bypassed mainstream forms of film

[64] This text was written in 1857/58 but unpublished in Marx's lifetime. It was published in England by Penguin Books and the New Left Review in 1973, translated by Martin Nicolaus. These passages are taken from the 1993 reprint.

production and exhibition through the use of small film cameras and a travelling form of exhibition in local halls, schools, and other non-industrial locations. Irish surf films emerge from the same film culture, displaying the same levels of autonomy in their production, distribution, and exhibition. This can be seen in DVD releases from the 2000s, such as *Driven, From Shadows* and *Waking Maeve*, before the market transitioned to online forms of exhibition. Many recent online releases – whether crowdfunded documentaries or short films - are representative of a growing cultural autonomy in filmmaking which blurs the lines between amateur and professional forms of production. This is further enabled by a system of community nodes on social media, film festivals, local screenings, and video platforms.

9.3 - Future Directions

This research has shown that unique forms of cultural production exist outside the dominant paradigms of industrial production or public financing in Ireland. Whilst examples of mainstream film production and public financing do exist in the surf film – *Waveriders* and *Between Land and Sea*, for example – they are not the most common form of production. Amateur forms of lifestyle filmmaking and subcultural cinema have significantly expanded over the past two decades, yet they remain a largely underexplored area of research. Irish surf films are at the forefront of this growing trend in Ireland and internationally. Similar practices can be seen amongst the Irish skateboarding community, in online releases such as *The Skateboarding Heritage of Portrush* (2024) and the cliff jumping film *Silent Descent* (Matthew Irvine and Matty Wenlock) which premiered at the Playhouse Theatre in Portrush in 2024. This trend can also be seen in the work of the No WIFI Collective in Wicklow, who staged screenings of their films at the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray in early 2025. These practices are based in youth and collaborativity and

grounded in participatory, local, regional, and online communities. Yet because online exhibition provides engagement with global communities, the films are unrepresentative of 'national' industries, or the interactions between national industries that dominate debates about 'transnational' filmmaking. They exemplify the postnationalist culture that Richard Kearney envisioned for Ireland in the late 1990s in that they represent an autonomous regional form of filmmaking which is pluralistic in its community identities and which actively engages with the globalised world.

This study hopes to provide a foundation for further research in both practical and theoretical understandings of amateur cinemas, in Ireland and internationally. Many studies of amateur cinema exist (Katelle 2003; Shand 2008; Rascaroli, Young, Monahan 2014; Odin 2014; Salazkina and Fibla Gutierrez 2018; Craven 2020), but a wide variety of amateur filmmaking has emerged since the early 2010s, each with distinct aesthetics and informal political economies. There is also a clear gap in research regarding the multiplying online platforms which exhibit and distribute these films. These alternative forms of filmmaking use a plethora of continuously evolving production and distribution technologies which means their economies should be studied individually, rather than grouped as a whole. Many of the films described in this work - from Tam Mullen's *Greenie* to Alice Ward's *Oishii* - also display unique engagements with labour and capital. The concept of amateur labour is clearly troubling for interpretations of media political economy, as is the idea that many contemporary producers of media do not conform to the historical paradigms of this form of intellectual inquiry. For example, Short Irish surf films – and Irish surf film festivals - show that the political economy of media can be based in social and cultural forms of capital, rather than financial capital. Other questions regarding the idea of the 'amateur' that must be addressed are how exactly to explain the recent breakdown in boundaries between the idea of amateur and professional? How do

collaborative and community driven productions negotiate funding, labour, and market constraints? How do contemporary production and postproduction technologies shape amateur cinema? What role do film festivals play in the economies of amateur cinemas? Further studies in contemporary amateur cinemas can show how economic, political, and social forces shape the production, distribution, and consumption of films outside formalised professional systems.

9.4 - Closing Remarks

When I first considered writing a critical study of Irish surf films (roughly around 2012), I was unsure how to proceed. Could they just be a fad? How could this form of filmmaking sustain itself practically in the long term? How would it be possible to analyse a body of work if it suddenly just stopped? But rather than fading into obscurity as a historical footnote, surf films have grown in number, and in a variety of new and interesting forms.[65] I have tried to emphasise that most surf films are produced within a youth orientated community based in subculture, but it is hard to answer how sustainable it is. This is because the form is still very new, and the oldest filmmakers are only in their late 30's and early 40s. But the community itself does seem to be able to sustain this form of production because the films have been produced over the course of 22 years and show no signs of abating.[75]

The introduction to this work referred to the concept of "pure" cinema. In this thesis, the term "pure" has two meanings. The first meaning is that many of Irish surf films are part of a lineage of subcultural surf filmmaking described as "pure", because they are

[65] For example, *Keep it a Secret* (Sean Duggan, 2022) was released during the writing of this thesis, so I was unable to include a significant discussion of the film. [75] The closure of the independently owned Pálás cinema in Galway may have some effect on the sustainability of Irish surf film festivals. The 'Irish Surf Film Festival' was held at this venue in 2023 and 2024.

rooted in amateur and everyday forms of subcultural practice, as opposed to being mainstream industrial films about surfing. Put simply, this practice stems from people who spend their leisure time surfing, and decide to make films about it (that they can show to others in their community). The second meaning of "pure" is based in the amateur Avant Garde practices of what was described in France in the 1930s and 40s as "pure" cinema. This cinema was described as "pure" because of its often-abstract emphasis on visual poetry, spectacle and sensation rather than plot, dialogue, narrative, or a desire to financially benefit from filmmaking. The application of these terms are conceptually unrelated, but "pure" Irish surf films are clearly rooted in similar aesthetic principles as "pure" cinema. Both describe an informal, amateur aesthetic grounded in motion, spectacle, and sensation – radical delirium - which deliberately exist outside mainstream industrial practices. For many, this is based in the everyday practice of lived experience and the desire to document ecstatic forms of personal experience.

In *Polemics of a New Cinema* Albie Thoms argued that surf filmmakers were "the only ones to have created an independent, vertically integrated economy to control production, distribution, and exhibition" (1978, 85). Thoms further argued that the rise of Australian surf films constituted "the most significant development in the history of Australian film production" (ibid: 89). Yet these independent qualities only seem to be recognised at a national level in Australia, perhaps because of the close associations with the rise of beach culture and its associated leisure activities with the historical idea of Australian national culture (Booth 2012, 2019). *Morning of the Earth* was considered culturally valuable enough to be chosen on a list of 75 classic Australian films to be restored by the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (2024). An independent Australian surf film archive also exists, which argues that surf cinema "helped shape Australian culture as we know it" and whose stated goal is to "to find, scan and restore as

much footage as possible to ensure these seminal images are preserved" (The Surf Film Archive n.d.).

This thesis has shown that the development of an Irish surf cinema is equally important in the story of contemporary Irish film. Although many surf films have been produced in Ireland since 2002, the most common form of production exists as a form of subcultural cinema which displays an autonomous, independent, and vertically integrated political economy. These films became established as a genre after 2010, enabled by affordable novel production and distribution technologies which allow them to connect with local and global subcultural communities, both online and at film festivals. They may not suit everyone's "taste", in the Bourdieusian sense of the word, nor do they conform to academic or industrial ideas of what a film should look like, how it should be funded, or how they should be studied. Regardless of these perspectives, the subcultural surf films described in this thesis represent one of the few occasions in Irish film history in which such a sustained, independent, collaborative, and community-based form of filmmaking has ever existed on the island of Ireland. That they have accomplished this completely externally to the burgeoning Irish screen industries which have developed in the last three decades is a testament to the subcultural communities that sustain their production through participatory, collaborative creativity. As such, Irish surf films should be considered as a distinct subsection of Irish cinema. Although most Irish surf films do not conform to the paradigm of a 'national' cinema, they should nevertheless be considered as a nationally important form of cultural production and this should be recognised in scholarship and in the archive.

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A Life in the Day. 2015. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L. Films. Streaming.

*A Lunar Cycle***.** 2018. Directed by Andrew Kaineder. Finisterre. Streaming.

A Plastic Ocean. 2016. Directed by Craig Leeson. Plastic Oceans Foundation. Streaming.

An Evening with Robin. 2013. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L. Films. Streaming.

Amygdala. 2014. Directed by Clem McInerney. Clem McInerney. Streaming.

Ar Gefn y Ddraig. 2018. Directed by Huw Erdynn. Huw Erdynn. Streaming.

A-Sides. 2012. Directed by Dylan Stott. Dylan Stott. Streaming.

Between Land and Sea. 2017. Directed by Ross Whitaker. Motive Films. DVD.

Beyond the Noise. 2017. Directed by Andrew Kaineder. Finisterre. Streaming.

Blow In. 2023. Directed by Andrew Kaineder and Joao Tudella. Andrew Kaineder and Joao Tudella.

Cape Cold. 2017. Directed by Tam Mullen. Tam Mullen. Streaming.

Calming Chaos. 2023. Directed by Ben Bettridge. Ben Bettridge. Streaming.

Children of the Norn. 2012. Directed by Melanie Curran. Meldew Productions. DVD.

Coming Up For Air. 2014. Directed by Mickey Smith. Astray Collective and Finisterre. Streaming.

Crystal Voyager. 1973. Directed by David Elfick. Dolphin Films. DVD

Darklands. 2019. Directed by Mark O'Connor and Conor McMahon. Streaming.

Dark Side of the Lens. 2010. Directed by Mickey Smith and Allan Wilson. Streaming.

Driven. 2007. Directed by Anthony Butler. Mr. B. Productions. DVD.

Dry Reality. 2016. Pockets Full of Water Productions. Streaming.

Ebb and Flow. 2019. Directed by Alice Rosaline Ward. Seapea Films. Streaming.

Elude. 2020. Directed by Perry Gershkow. Perry Gershkow. Streaming.

Eye of the Storm. 2002. Directed by Joel Conroy. Inis Films. DVD.

Farraige Na hEireann. 2011. Directed by Ken O'Sullivan. Sea Fever Productions. TG4.

Five Summer Stories. 1972. Jim Freeman and Greg MacGillivray. MacGillivray Freeman Films. VHS.

Fluid Druid. 2023. Directed by Seamus McGoldrick and Diego Balestro. Streaming.

From Shadows: Two Winters One Country. 2007. Directed by Allan Wilson. Astray Films and Magic Seaweed. DVD.

Fusion. 2010. Directed by Anthony Butler. Mr. B. Productions. DVD.

Greenie. 2003. Directed by Tam Mullen. Tam Mullen. DVD.

Growing. 2014-2015. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L. Films. Streaming.

Hawaiian Surfing Movie. 1953. Directed by Bud Browne. DVD.

Here and Now. 2018. Directed by Taylor Steele. Poor Specimen Films. DVD.

Hounds of the Storm. 2024. Directed by Clem McInerney. Red Bull. Streaming.

Hundred Foot Wave. 2021 – 2023. Directed by Chris Smith. HBO.

Hunros Jorna. 2022. Directed by Mickey Smith and Allan Wilson. Finisterre. Streaming.

Hush-a-Bye Baby. 1990. Directed by Margo Harkin. Besom Productions.

Katie. 2008. Directed by Ross Whitaker. Motive TV.

Keep It A Secret. 2022. Directed by Sean Duggan. Streaming.

Inside Out. 2013. Directed by Peter Clyne. Outer Cells Media. Streaming.

Into the Sea. 2016. Directed by Marion Poizneau. Togo Films. Streaming.

Ireland's Ocean. 2014. Directed by Ken O'Sullivan. Sea Fever Productions.

Ireland's Deep Atlantic. 2018. Directed by Ken O'Sullivan. Sea Fever Productions. RTE.

Isle of My Youth. 2013. Directed by Simon Francis Handbrook. Simon Francis Handbrook.

Le Chéile. 2019. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L. Films. Streaming.

Let's Be Frank. 2018. Directed by Justin Mitchell. Brain Farm Digital Cinema. DVD.

Litmus. 1996. Directed by Andrew Kidman. The Val Dusty Experiment. DVD.

Long Run. 2023. Directed by George Karbus. George Karbus. Streaming.

No Boarders. 2014. Directed by Melanie Curran. Meldrew Productions. DVD.

North of Nowhere. 2013. Directed by Peter Clyne. Outer Cells Media. Streaming.

North of the Sun. 2012. Directed by Jørn Nyseth Ranum and Inge Wegge. North of the Sun Films. DVD.

Man of Aran. 1934. Directed by Robert Flaherty. Pathé Exchange.

Martial Narrative. 2018. Directed by Chris Case. Chris Case. Streaming.

Misery Loves Company. 2018. Directed by Clem McInerney. Monster Energy. Streaming.

Mistakes Made are Lessons Learnt. 2016. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L Films. Streaming.

Moment by Moment. 2019. Tropical Motions Productions. Streaming.

Morning of the Earth. 1972. Directed by Alby Falzon. Australian Film Development Corporation. DVD.

Murk. 2014. Directed by Peter Clyne. Outer Cells Media. Streaming.

My Last Two Winters. 2024. Directed by Clem McInerney. Red Bull. Streaming.

Oceanic Acid. 2014. Directed by Peter Clyne. Outer Cells Media. Streaming

Of Viking Minds. 2016. Directed by Chris Case. Chris Case. Streaming.

Oishii. 2023. Directed by Alice Rosaline Ward. Seapea Films. Streaming.

Otherland. 2022. Directed by Alice Rosaline Ward. Seapea Films. Streaming.

Over the Ledge. 2020. Directed by Clem McInerney. Monster Energy.

Pablo. 2017. Directed by Justin Baker. CBeebies.

Pacific Vibrations. 1970. Directed by John Severson. John Severson Productions. DVD.

Performing Monkeys: A British and Irish Surf Film. 2006. Directed by Anthony Butler. Mr. B. Productions. DVD.

Pillow Point. 2023. Directed by Liam Grant. Liam Grant. Streaming.

Point Break. 1991. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. 20th Century Fox.

Powers of Three. 2009. Directed by Ross Cairns. Relentless and Carve Magazine. Streaming.

Reflections of an Underwater Cameraman. 2016. Directed by Ken O'Sullivan. Sea Fever Productions. Streaming.

Rhythms. 2024. Directed by Alice Rosaline Ward. Seapea Films. Streaming.

Riding Giants. 2004. Directed by Stacy Peralta. StudioCanal.

Riders to the Sea. 2014. Directed by Orla Walsh. Irish Film Board. Streaming.

Room with A View. 2011. Directed by Dylan Stott. Dylan Stott. Streaming.

Rosie. 2018. Directed by Paddy Breathnach. Element Pictures. DVD.

Run to the Sea. 2013. Directed by Dylan Stott. Dylan Stott. Streaming.

Ryan's Daughter. 1970. Directed by David Lean. Faraway Productions.

Salt. 2024. Alice Rosaline Ward. Seapea Films. Streaming.

Savage Waters. 2022. Directed by Michael Corker. Whipped Sea.

Saviours. 2007. Directed by Ross Whitaker. Street Films.

Sea Fever. 2019. Directed by Neasa Hardiman. Rough Sea Productions, Giant Leap Productions.

Sea Fever: An Irish Surf Odyssey. 2007. Directed by Ken O'Sullivan. Sea Fever Productions. DVD.

Shaka Status. 2017. Directed by Dylan Stott. Dylan Stott. Streaming.

Smog of the Sea. 2017. Directed by Ian Cheney. Discovery Channel. Streaming.

Spirit of Akasha. 2014. Directed by Andrew Kidman. Produced by Andrew Kidman and Alby Falzon. DVD.

Silent Descent. 2024. Directed by Matthew Irvine and Matty Wenlock. Matthew Irvine and Matty Wenlock. S

Slippery When Wet. 1958. Directed by Bruce Brown. Bruce Brown Films. DVD.

Step into Liquid. 2003. Directed by Dana Brown. Artisan Entertainment.

Storm Surfers 3D. 2012. Directed by Justin McMillan and Christopher Nelius. Storm Surfers Films. DVD

Surf Down Under. 1958. Directed by Bud Browne. Bud Browne. DVD.

Surf En Iran. 2010. Directed by Marion Poizneau. Marion Poizneau and Easkey Britton. Streaming.

Substance: A British and Irish Surf Film. 2008. Directed by Anthony Butler. Mr B. Productions. DVD.

Surfers of Fortune. 1994. Directed by Brian Bleak. Quiksilver. Streaming.

Tackling the All Blacks. 2022. Directed by Ross Whitaker. Videos on the Net and Irish Rugby Football Union. Streaming.

Taobh le Taobh. 2019. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L. Films. Streaming.

The Big Surf. 1957. Directed by Bud Browne. Bud Browne. DVD.

The Crest. 2017. Directed by Mark Christopher Covino. Butter Flavored Films. Streaming.

The Dawn Wall. 2017. Directed by Josh Lowell and Peter Mortimer. Sender Films. DVD

The Deepest Breath. 2023. Directed by Laura McGann. Motive Films. Netflix.

The Dimming Tide: A Dublin Surf Odyssey. 2012. Directed by Jules Charlton. Jules Charlton. Streaming.

The Endless Summer. 1966. Directed by Bruce Brown. Bruce Brown Films. DVD.

The Endless Winter: A Very British Surf Movie. 2012. Matt Crocker and James Dean.

The Far Shore. 2002. Directed by Gregory Schell. Soul Carvers Productions. DVD.

The Innermost Limits of Pure Fun. 1970. Directed by George Greenough. George Greenough Productions.

The Lad from Old Ireland. 1910. Directed by Sidney Olcott. Kalem Film Company

The Quiet Man. 1952. Directed by John Ford. Republic Pictures.

The Skateboarding Heritage of Portrush. 2024. Directed by Jim Donaghey. Ulster University. Streaming.

The Silver Branch. 2018. Directed by Katrina Costello. Silver Branch Films. Streaming.

The Silver Safari. 2006. Angus Hubbard and Naomi Britton. Naomi Britton. DVD.

Thicker Than Water. 2000. Directed by Jack Johnson and Chris Malloy. Moonshine Conspiracy Films. DVD.

Threading Edges. 2015. Directed by Peter Clyne. Outer Cells Media. Streaming.

Tommerline. 2016. Directed by Mickey Smith. Mickey Smith. Streaming.

Trek to Makaha. 1956. Directed by Bud Browne. Bud Browne. DVD.

Trendy New Atrocity. 2013. Directed by Dylan Stott. Dylan Stott. Streaming.

Unstoppable. 2019. Directed by Aaron Lieber. Red Bull Media House. Streaming.

Veronica Mars. 2014. Directed by Rob Thomas. Warner Bros. DVD

View from a Blue Moon. 2017. Directed by Blake Vincent Kueny. Brain Farm Digital Cinema. DVD.

Waking Maeve. 2010. Tropical Motions Productions. DVD.

Waveriders. 2008. Directed by Joel Conroy. Inis Films/Besom Productions. DVD.

We Out Dere. 2023. Directed by Eric Witkoff. Eric Witkoff. Streaming.

Wet Dreams. 2014. Produced by Pockets Full of Water. Streaming.

Winter. 2013. Directed by Fergal Smith, Mickey Smith, Kev L. Smith, Allan Wilson. Streaming.

Winter Glow. 2015. Directed by Kev L. Smith. Kev L. Films. Streaming.

Wish I Was Here. 2014. Directed by Zach Braff. Starz Digital Media. DVD

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