Giving Newcastle the (Surf) Flick: Surfing Celluloid from the (Former) Steel City

TO THOSE who have never been to Newcastle, Australia’s seventh largest city is often imagined as a grimy, industrial hub that was once home to Australia’s largest steelworks and is now home to the world’s largest coal exporting port. Greenpeace refers to Newcastle as ‘Ground Zero’ in the war against climate change.1 In 2007, Port Waratah Coal Services (PWCS) exported more than $4 billion tonnes of coal, most of which went to Asian destinations to fuel booming manufacturing economies. Every load had to pass within metres of the Newcastle Harbour surf break, which can provide one of the most intense and hollow barrels on the mid-north coast.

In June 2007, Newcastle gained worldwide attention when an east coast low pushed the 40,000-tonne bulk carrier Pasha Bulker onto a reef off Nobby’s Beach. Local surfers have reported a significant loss in the quality of the right-handers that once broke where the ship was wedged for nearly three weeks and directed their criticism at PWCS. In February 2008, PWCS provided the Newcastle Surf Lifesaving Club with a $90,000 sponsorship gift, making it the most generous benefactor in the club’s 100-year history. Such are the contradictions of ‘Newie’, where quality surf breaks and industry have long had to co-exist. Tracks magazine juxtaposed the contradiction when the cover of its very first issue used an image of Newcastle’s steelworks on the cover with reportage of a Newcastle surf competition.

Newcastle is perhaps best known among surfers as the home of Mark Richards. Known locally as the Mayor of Merewether, Richards is a four-time world surfing champion. The city has an annual World Qualifying Series event named in his honour and the University of Newcastle has awarded MR an honorary doctorate for his service to the community. Dr MR, alongside Layne Beachley, fronts television advertisements for a local Toyota dealership and his image has appeared in public spaces where he advises onlookers that domestic violence is not acceptable. MR’s shop in Hunter Street has become a surf traveller’s Mecca-of-sorts, where his Mum – who still works the shop’s counter – will summon him from the shaping room to have his image snapped with his arm draped around another surfing pilgrim.

Newcastle’s reputation as a surf city owes much to its city centre being hemmed in by surf beaches and a working harbour. Newcastle train station is situated a few hundred metres from the surf and it provides access to surfers who can’t afford the real estate now typically found on the Australian east coast within walking distance to the beach. Rooney claims Newcastle provides an ideal location for filmmakers seeking metaphorical contrasts through the aesthetics provided by an ‘industrial steel town, bland suburbia and spectacular beaches’.2 The area around the railway station provides a space where young car owners gather at night and cruise the city with hip hop music and gangster rap emanating from slowly moving vehicles. Depending on one’s view point, the combination of cars, youth and surf blend together to create either a vibrant youth culture or a moral threat. So it provides little surprise that filmmakers have chosen the city as a convenient backdrop for yarns about Australian male youth and surfing culture where sex drives narratives.

December 22, 2007, marked 30 years since Summer City opened at Sydney’s Century Theatre. Filmed around Catherine Hill Bay, Summer City (alternatively known as Coast Of Terror) was written and produced by Phil Avalon, who also sang the title song, did the catering, and played one of the four main male roles in the film. The film was inspired by Avalon’s experiences when he lived at Merewether in Newcastle. It brought together National Institute of Dramatic Art students Mel Gibson and Steve Bisley two years before the duo would famously pair up in the first of the Mad Max films. Catherine Hill Bay is the site of a long-running dispute between locals and environmental groups – including the Surfrider Foundation – and developers Rose Group over plans to build massive housing estates.

Summer City was set in the early 1960s, with clips from Brian Henderson’s Bandstand, songs by Australian rock ‘n’ roll stars including Johnny O’Keefe, and an appearance by the popular disc jockey Ward ‘Pally’ Austin. Essentially a road movie, the film portrays four mates from the city on a getaway weekend coming into a community where all is not what it appears. Sex with an underage virgin has dire consequences.

The film was Gibson’s acting debut in a feature film. The other mate in the quartet was played by John Jarratt, whose performance in the low-budget Australian thriller Wolf Creek was integral to that film grossing more than $US25 million at the box office alone. Summer City also featured television bombshell Abigail Rogan, and James Elliott, who played Alf Sutcliffe on the Australian television drama Number 96.

When released at Newcastle Lyriche theatre (which became Showcase City Cinemas and closed in May 2008 to make way for a re-development in the Newcastle mall), Summer City broke the box office record there, which had been held by Ken Russell’s Tommy. Avalon retains the congratulatory telegram sent to him by cinema part-owner Theo Goumas, advising him that his production had knocked Tommy off its pedestal. Summer City’s performance at the box office (it took $16,000 in one week at the Century Theatre when an average return was around $3000) remains all the more astounding when one considers audiences around the globe at the time were much more likely to be interested in a Star Wars Skywalker than a Summer City boardrider.

Discussing Summer City on the internet movie website IMDb, the film’s rookie director Chris Fraser wrote that the arguments between the cast and Avalon (partly inspired by what Fraser refers to as the film’s ‘ludicrously low budget’) meant the untold story around the making of the film remains far more interesting than the film itself. The catering budget evaporated in a week and Avalon then added that responsibility to his Summer City portfolio. One of the stories Fraser might eventually decide to reveal involves the Catherine Hill RSL, which Avalon hired for the cast and crew to both sleep and work in. Forced to vacate on a Saturday during production for a pre-booked

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wedding, an under-the-weather Gibson and Bisley 'mooned' the wedding party in an attempt to get them out so the lads could reclaim what they considered were their digs. The surfing scenes in the film are not particularly inspiring because Summer City suffered from the low-budget feature-film dilemma of production schedules not necessarily being in sync with swell, wind and tide. Additionally, much of the technology for shooting in the water was yet to become widely available.

When non-surfing Sandy (Jarratt) asks Scollop (Gibson) what he likes about surfing..."after all, it's just a sport..."Gibson replies with a response often utilised in popular culture to try and explain surfing's attraction. 'It's not just a sport, mate...it might sound stupid but it's more a way of life, I suppose.' The film received numerous harsh reviews. Writing in 1980, film critic David Stratton was not particularly impressed: 'Summer City was made on the cheap...It seems unlikely to have involved much passionate dedication to anything other than the desire to make a dollar.'

Almost 20 years later, the film Blackrock (1996), written by Nick Enright, portrays a working-class seaside community that shares some of the hallmarks of the seaside suburbs of New South Wales portrayed in Puberty Blues. Enright denied his work on the subject matter was based around the brutal rape and murder of 14-year-old Stockton schoolgirl Leigh Leigh by young men at a party at a Stockton surf club in 1989, but the similarities in the film warrant comparison. Leigh Leigh was raped, kicked, and spat upon, then raped again, strangled and finally bashed to death with a rock. There's evidence as many as ten young men aged between 15 and 19 participated in the attacks, but only three were charged. The film's director, Steve Vidler, said he understood that the Stockton community might feel distressed by the film, but said the work 'did not seek to tell the truth but examine a range of themes.'

Blackrock was shot around Newcastle at a variety of locations including Caves Beach, which is a short distance from Catherine Hill Bay. The $3 million film's subject matter received a good deal of media attention - much of which focused on the links to Leigh Leigh's murder. Delvecchio quoted then Deputy Lord-Mayor of Newcastle, Frank Rigby, as saying, 'Actors and plays are there to build dreams, not distort the truth...The people of Stockton would feel, when are they going to stop torturing the innocent people of this world?'

In Blackrock, surfers are shown as an insular group whose loyalty to each other causes them to close ranks to the point that the female victim, Tracey, is seen by some in the community - including those whose sons, brothers and mates face prison terms - as the instigator and perpetrator of the crime that resulted in her death. In the film's parable, Tracey is 'up for it.' The 'gang bang' - where a number of men take turns in having intercourse with a female - has had a long presence in Australian surf culture. Former Australian surfing champion Nat Young writes in his biography Nat's Nat and That's That about young females at Collaroy in the early 1960s who were 'really into group sex.' Young elaborates that the situation became so popular with surfers on the northern beaches that it was occurring 'a few times a week on a regular basis,' but then it started 'getting a bit out of hand, the line getting longer and longer as friends and acquaintances from other beaches joined in' to 'screw' 'The Grunter,' 'Sally Apple Bowels' and 'Brenda the Bender.' The highlight, according to Young, was The Grunter's first screw with Young and Henry on a board in the water off the point at Collaroy.

Blackrock explores notions around sexual violence, generational conflict and the value system associated with mateship. One of those values places 'dobbing' or 'dogging' at the bottom of desirable male traits and in the film it is made clear that co-operating with state authority should be resisted in all circumstances. In Blackrock, Tracey's murderer Ricko says to best mate Jared that 'dobbers are gutless girls.' The insult implies that real weakness and lack of character among males can be expressed through likening any co-operation with authority as being a feminine trait.

Fractured families, absent fathers and stoic mothers are prevalent in the film, as are 'friendly' insults and jokes alleging homosexuality. Young women who do not acquiesce to male desire are called 'lezzees.' Binge drinking among both the youth and the adults charged with their supervision fuels promiscuity and other risk taking behaviour, such as car park surfing on the bonnet of the ubiquitous Sandman panel van. There's little room for traditional notions of romance in Blackrock - the surfers talk about 'going through'...
girls aged 14, cops ask interviewees present at the murder what they did when ‘they had finished’ with the victim.

The ‘tight-knit community’, as Australian media refers to any regional town dealing with tragedy, responds to the rape and death of Tracey with an unfocused anger that finds its expression in the mistrust of outsiders. Shortly after the murder, ‘dobbers die’ is spray painted on the windows of the local ferry terminal. The intrusive nature of the media on those dealing with grief is repeatedly visited throughout the film. In a scene reminiscent of the symbolic burning of a surfboard belonging to a dead surfer in Puberty Blues, the surfboard belonging to Tracey’s murderer, who chose to jump off a cliff rather than face police for the rape and murder of Tracey, is set alight and pushed into the surf. The grief of the gathered is filmed by a news crew from a hovering helicopter. The surfing in Blackrock is portrayed as providing the opportunity for group bonding, individual expression and solitude and escape where both the body and mind can be cleared and cleansed.

A decade on from Blackrock, another film has been made about Newcastle surf culture. Simply titled Newcastle and directed by American Dan Castle who hails from the town New Castle in Delaware (Dan Castle from New Castle went to Newcastle to make a film called Newcastle), the coming-of-age drama uses competitive surfing to explore the lives of three brothers, family, sibling rivalry, thwarted ambition and teen sexuality. Older brother Victor (Reshad Strik) has seen his chance at becoming a surfing star disappear due to his inability to push himself beyond his natural talent. His girlfriend and baby have moved out and he’s still hanging with mates and abusing alcohol. Victor harbors a deep resentment towards his 17-year-old brother Jesse (Lachlan Buchanan), whose star is on the rise in the surfing world. Jesse’s twin brother Fergus (Xavier Samuel) is only interested in surfing to get closer to Jesse’s competitive nemesis, Andy (Kirk Jenkins).

The film’s cast includes Shane Jacobson, the lovable portaloo rogue from the Australian hit comedy Kenny, along with veteran Australian actors Barry Otto and Joy Smithers.

In a clever marketing ploy, Layne Beachley, who played herself in Blue Crush, makes a cameo appearance in Newcastle along with rugby league legend Andrew Johns. The pair have non-speaking roles as surf judges. The young and attractive cast consists mostly of unknowns, but the real star of the film is Newcastle itself. Given a polish through the lens of cinematographer Richard Michalak – whose credits include the brilliantly lit Dark City – the city transcends its grimy image to sparkle in a way that even the most passionate Novocastrians will find surprising. The opening scenes of the film could be an advertisement made by the Hunter Tourist bureau.

Newcastle is Castle’s feature film directing debut, although he directed the documentary Zona Rasa (2005), a film about male strippers who work in Mexico’s gay clubs as well as one of the short films in Boys to Men (2001), an anthology of four short films about gay men at various stages of life. In Newcastle, 17-year-old Fergus falls in lust with Andy. On a weekend surf trip, where the other surfers are having heterosexual sex, Fergus and Andy head for the sand dunes. It is implied they share a sexual experience in the sand dunes overnight, although the filmmaker has preferred to leave the matter somewhat ambiguous rather than deliver Brokeback Surfboards.

Variety staff writers claim that surf movies exist to put pretty young people in very few clothes and capture, via acrobatic cinematography, the kinetic glory of people riding huge waves on relative matchsticks of wood and Fiberglas (sic)...Castle’s debut meets the banal sun/sand/sex requirements of genre buffs, but its blunt eroticism and portrait of confused adolescence could also strike a chord with audiences.6

Surfing provides perfect opportunities for perfect bodies to be naturally unclad and Newcastle constantly creates and exploits such opportunities. This could be one of the reasons the film was bought by Sony in Japan, where it was released in June 2008, somewhat puzzlingly, under the moniker Blue Blue Blue. At times the camera seems to linger on the bodies, especially of shirtless young men with washboard stomachs, just too long and some more judicious editing would benefit the film. Sure, it’s eye candy that is part of the film’s appeal to a Bluewater High audience, but nevertheless such moments do little to drive the narrative. The camera gaze will divide audiences and critics. Savage writes that the teen cast ‘demonstrate a maturity and dedication to their craft that seems refreshing when compared with the Ken-doll plasticity of their American counterparts found on shows like The O.C., for example.’ But Variety staff writers suggested the film ‘is a bit of a soap, which when combined with this much water, tends to end up a bit thick.7

As mentioned, surfing feature film shooting schedules and the rhythms of the ocean don’t always match up, and Newcastle attempts to combat this problem by shooting much of the surfing action in the water and keeping the framing tight. Castle used four water cameras under the experienced watch of Tim Bonython, and the result for a low-budget film is outstanding. The production values rank...
among the best ever seen in Australia for a film with such a modest budget. As a result, surfers will probably find the film's surfing scenes have an authenticity that escapes many other offerings.

However, Newcastle, like Summer City and Blackrock before it, finds no space in the film for women to be active participants in the surf culture. While Debra Ades and Rebecca Breeds both fit as snuggly into bikinis as the boys fit into boardshorts, their depiction as beachside trophies watching the boys surf emulates the roles of girls in Puberty Blues made more than a quarter of century earlier. However, Newcastle fails to share that film's conclusion that sees the girls rejecting a passive existence and they decide to start surfing themselves.

While Summer City was more aligned to its times in terms of dominant societal attitudes, and where Blackrock's focus is the insularity of male groupings where women are communally subjugated, the passive role of women in Newcastle is both disappointing and desperately out of date. In many ways its representations of females make it archaic and its thin story line with a final act relying on the well-trodden surf movie cliché of an individual rising up in competition to overcome personal demons (Blue Crush is the genre's biggest budget example) is not sufficiently sophisticated for an adult audience.

Newcastle, the city, is changing rapidly. BHP closed in 1999. The view gained sitting out off Newcastle point looking back towards the land has altered dramatically in the past five years. It is all steel and glass multi-million dollar units. Former industrial sites with potential ocean views are bringing top dollars for those developers with a residential high-rise glint in the eye. Now not much more than outer suburb of Sydney in terms of identity, the pubs are gentrified, there is a peak hour, the parking meters are moving closer to the beach and many surf shops don't sell surfboards. And the surf is nearly always crowded.

While this article began by pointing out that Newcastle has provided a convenient backdrop for films dealing with surfing and male youth culture, the number of female surfers that can be found in the local breaks on even the coldest days suggest that perhaps it's time for filmmakers to start broadening horizons and looking beyond stories where females don't surf.

— Paul Scott

4 Delvecchio, 1996.
8 Variety, 2008.

My Mate Jonno

We all knew by the ocean of the day that today was going to be a great day. The waves were pounding harder than Grandpa on Grandma’s day, except these ones were pounding longer and deeper than Grandpa could ever dream of. Judging by the size of the waves the likelihood of an ambo making an appearance today was equally as high. When the curtains were drawn you could hear the boys gasp. Old Macca’s single fin nearly fell off – again, Patto’s tail started wagging and the Neilson Brothers’ joints started creaking. Even though we were almost busting out of our rack we all knew that there would only be one of us going out today. That’s the way it was, well most of the time, and as excited as we all were we also knew that days like these make you want to cry. You didn’t mind missing out on surf when the waves were average but when they were going off, which they were today, and you missed out, it was devastating.

I felt good today.

It had been a week since I went out for a wave with Jonno and between you and me I was going off that day. Jonno was stoked. I did this floater off about a Sft face and as I landed I dug my fins in and stalled Jonno into this wicked barrel. He copped the lip in the head after a couple of seconds and we both got hammered but by the time he got back on me we were virtually out the back ready for the next one. Some of Jonno’s mates were there too which was cool. I loved surfing with Jonno’s mates. They’re a good bunch of blokes and on that day I was in the mood for some company. I’m not one to brag but I was getting some sideways looks that day. There was a chick out there too, she had a head like the south end of a north-bound camel apparently, but her board was nice. She was pretty lean with nice curves and a stringer that went all the way up if you know what I mean. You can have your rails, your channels and thrusters… I’m a stringer man all the way.

So there we all were, lined up like a bunch of hard-ons at a titty bar. Jonno came back in the room and we all fell silent. There were seven of us in total but only three of us were really in the hunt. The other four boys were either too short or too big, except for Skipp – he had Jeff Buckley’s chance of getting wet – I mean the bloke weighed about three times as much as the rest of us and had rails as thick as Clint Newton (He’s the bloke that broke up with Jennifer Hawkins). The only reason Jonno had Skipp was because he was his first board and by looking at him you could tell too.