Surf's Up: Facing the slow cancellation of nature

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1. Introduction: Dayvan Cowboy

In 2005, director Melissa Olson created the first official music video for the Scottish electronica duo Boards of Canada. While it does not fit into Booth's (1996) typology of surfing films, it nevertheless captures some of the key sensibilities of such films. Sure, the four-and-a-half-minute "Dayvan Cowboy" features the big wave surfing of Laird Hamilton, but that is of secondary importance. More crucially, the ending of the video is such that it clearly references the lineage of what Booth calls "pure" surfing films: The final frames feature an image of the sun setting into the surf. This, of course, is the motif that also concludes Bruce Braun's 1966 *Endless Summer*; the motif that has subsequently become central to the iconography of the film. The "Dayvan Cowboy" sunset is sampled from another pure surf film; the ending sequence of David Elfick's 1973 *Crystal Voyager*, famously scored by Pink Floyd.

Why does the ocean sunset motif reoccur in surfing films? For one, it encapsulates the nature-civilization binary which serves as a foundation for such films. (Ormrod, 2008; 2009) This binary can, in turn, be traced in surf culture in general: Note how scholars have investigated how civilization or artifice undermines authenticity, be it in relation to capitalism (Lawler, 2010; Palmås, 2014) or technology (Palmås, 2015; Roberts and Ponting, 2020). Thus, the authentic "soul surfer" is one that is pitted "against the environment, not other people" (Wheaton and Beal, 2003: 164). Given the absence of human antagonists, one could argue that authentic surfing is a drama that presupposes a "nature-as-other".

This nature-civilization binary is also reflected in the aesthetics of surfing. As Mark Stranger points out,

> appreciation of the sublime in nature – in particular the ocean and its waves – is […] at the heart of the surfing aesthetic. (Stranger, 2011: 15)

The experience of the sublime typically involves infinite space, but the ocean sunset motif also induces a sense of temporal infinity: The sepia-toned image of the ocean sunset is reminiscent of old photographs of lost times. The *Endless Summer* motif is the sunset of yesterday, of yesteryear, and of every sunset to come. The flip side of the youth- and body-oriented surfing culture is the gnawing awareness of one's own inevitable corporeal decline. Faced with the finitude of our individual selves, the eternal sunset becomes a form of consolation which gives meaning to the authentic surfing experience.

Still, however much we desire this timeless nature, there is the bad news that we already know: The notion of an unchanging nature is seriously compromised in the context of the climate crisis. This chapter will suggest that surfing culture is not simply one that cherishes authentic nature – equally, it can be understood as a culture that has long grappled with "the slow cancellation" of this very concept of nature. Behind the stoked surfer in awe of capital-N Nature, there is a double who senses the loss of this authentic nature, yet struggles to explicate this unease. This somewhat more melancholic sentiment can be placed in alignment with a conceptualization of the environment that signifies a utopian letting-go of nature-as-we-knew it. This, in turn, is broadly in line with the Deleuzo-Guattarian imperative to create a new earth.

The argument is structured as follows: Section two will review a Deleuzian account of how surfing can be understood in relation to its environment. Here, surfing emerges as a craftsman-like tapping of intensive properties of matter. Section three will explore a critique of such Deleuzian ethics, which suggests that this all-too prevalent form of Deleuze-inspired affirmativism jars with a social world in need of a politics of negativity. The section also introduces the notion of the "Red Bull sublime"; an extreme sport aesthetic that animates this affirmativism. Responding to this critique, section four suggests that the affirmation-centric mainstream of post-war surfing culture has been accompanied by the above-mentioned double, which struggles to make sense of a "slow cancellation of nature". Section five

construes this process as an encounter with the "toxic sublime"; an experience which may spark political sensibilities, and ultimately new political communities. This conjecture is continued in section six, which suggests that such experiential encounters are precisely that which provokes thought, referencing Deleuze's account of the image of thought. In this way, the chapter concludes, the other side of surfing culture may contribute to a reconsideration about our place in the world.

2. Into this world

Along with Hamilton's big wave surfing, Olson's "Dayvan Cowboy" also features images from Joseph Kittinger's 1960 skydive from the stratosphere. The composition of the imagery and the music suggests a juxtaposition between the aeronaut and the surfer: The eerie and disorienting fall through empty space, versus the joyful play with natural elements. The cold abstraction of celestial mechanics, versus the vibrant warmth of thermodynamics and vivacious turbulence of fluid dynamics. Lifeless space, versus the vibrant intensive processes on earth.

Such a vitalist reading of the video is broadly consistent with a Deleuzian reading of surfing. (Palmås, 2009) Indeed, surfing can be understood as the craftsmanlike capability to tap the "intensive properties" displayed by lively matter. In order to grasp the notion of the "intensive", it is useful to start from Deleuze's account of the relation between the actual and the virtual. These categories have been subject to philosophical debate. Peter Hallward (2006) argues that Deleuzian ontology implies that the actual realm is determined by the virtual, which undercuts the political agency of the human subject. Is there not, Hallward asks, a risk that this ontology leads the reader "out of this world" – that is, away from the practical world of politics?

Although Deleuze was interested in surfing as such, he never used it to explicate his ontological claims. Nevertheless, the act of surfing may serve as a useful example with which to make the actual-virtual distinction come alive. Indeed, the case of surfing is useful for explicating how the virtual and the actual are engaged in a complex interplay, subject to "mediation" by intensive processes. The act of surfing thus illustrates how human subjects can indeed – contrary to Hallward's concerns – intervene in the world.

It all starts with the waves: Swell emerges from the sun blasting its energy over the earth, generating differences in temperature in the atmosphere and in the oceans, setting air and water in motion. When studying these weather systems in detail, meteorologists have shown that air – as it rises from the heated surface of the earth – follows particular patterns of motion. The capacity to "fall into" these patterns of motion exist immanently in air and water. These flows may look more or less chaotic when observed in a weather system or in waves, but mathematical modelling of the floating medium's accelerations and decelerations reveal that they follow a strict pattern. Outside of the world of mathematical modelling, we never actually see these patterns – we can only see the whirls and flows that they give rise to. This, then, is one example of how the virtual (the immanent capabilities of matter, the patterns of motion) is enacted in the actual world of weather and waves.

From fluid dynamics, we also know that the seemingly chaotic flows consist of several distinct capacities of the air and water. Laminar flow is an even flow that emerges in slow velocities, but this even flow is disrupted at higher flow velocities, at which point turbulence sets in. Here, laminarity and turbulence are examples of two different virtual patterns. This suggests that matter may hold several virtual capacities, which can be effectuated in the actual realm.

The surfer, then, has these different aspects of reality to relate to: the actual (the wave, represented by a certain wave height), as well as the virtual (the motion patterns of laminarity and turbulence). There is also a third category to consider here – that of the intensive, which is represented by the temperature and pressure in the atmosphere, and the pressure in the water around the fins. Intensities have a particular relation to the "extensive" properties of the actual world: the water in the wave can be measured both in terms of extensive properties (wave height in metres) and intensive properties (pressure in Pascal). If the wave is split in two, the wave height (the extensive) may change, but the pressure (the intensive) stays the same. Further, and more importantly, differences in intensities have the capacity to drive fluxes of matter or energy.

This is why surfing can be understood as the craftsmanlike capability to tap the intensive properties displayed by various forms of matter. A surfer is someone who has developed exceptional skills in reading weather map representations of air pressure and temperatures, thus predicting the formation of storms and swell. The surfer knows exactly – at every given

speed, at every given position on the wave – how hard to pressurise the board to avoid or assist the onset of turbulence around its fins. Thus, the surfer's reality does not only consist of actual waves and virtual phenomena such as convection and turbulence. When practising this craft of surfing, one orients oneself in relation to a specific aspect of reality: differences in atmospheric pressure and temperature, differences in pressure around the board's fins, and other *differences in intensity*.

To this, one must add the relation between the surfer and the board. In Deleuzian terminology, this should be understood as an *assemblage*. The joining of two such bodies – be they human or non-human – adds new capacities. This phenomenon has been described as the "enlarged sense" of the intensive (DeLanda, 2002: 73): Any given body is thus not only subject to the spatio-temporal dynamisms described by thermodynamics. It is also subject to shifting capacities to affect and be affected, which are released through *assemblages*. These are always relational – the capability to surf a wave resides not in the surfer, the board, or the wave. This capacity is only released when the components act together as an assemblage. Assemblages therefore host emergent properties: its properties are more than the sum of the properties of its parts. As such, these components are connected through "relations of exteriority" – there is no essence in the separate parts.

Thus, through studying the surfer's manoeuvering of the intensive, we can see how the virtual does not rob us of our agency. When viewed from this Deleuzian perspective, the world appears to host an abundance of differences in intensities, all waiting to be exploited. This resonates with an experimental approach to the world, and a kind of political joyfulness: "We live in a world […] where not only people but the established powers have a stake in transmitting sad affects to us […] which reduce our power to act." (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987: 61) In this way, political action only becomes possible if we ignore those who rule by seeking "to pursuade us that life is hard and a burden". Taken together, this reading of Deleuze offers an ethics on how to engage with the world, and devise political tactics.

3. The affirmativism of the Red Bull sublime

There are, however, those that feel that this joyful celebration of intensive processes has become problematic. Media theorist Alexander Galloway is one of those critics:

> There's certainly an intoxicating sense of intensity in this language. Affirm. Enhance. Maximize. Optimize. Expand. I love joy and affirmation as much as the next person. And lord knows we all need to care for ourselves and care for others in these dark times. But I worry that the assumption of ontological if not subjective largess leads in a direction we might not want to follow. (Galloway, 2017)

For Galloway, then, the description of the world as a set of intensities and assemblages to be exploited represents a problematic tendency within contemporary cultural theory. He speculates that in the future, "intellectual historians will identify something like '2000s Realist Theory'", which systematically "excludes the negative in favor of affirmation and sublime positivity through expansion and intensification". Deleuze's work, he argues, has been reduced to being nothing but an ethics of affirmation and joy. As such, it has become politically ineffective, not least as it stands in opposition to more recent trends in political theory and activism. These include disability studies and afro-pessimism; "essentially anyone focusing on insufficiency, finitude, diminishment, nihilism, negativity, de-growth, generic personhood, and other related themes".

Galloway's concern is directed at "a certain kind of Deleuzian School" that has become "so commonplace today that it has essentially become a TED talk" (Berry and Galloway, 2015: 8). Today, there are even "Google Deleuzians […] who see the world as a vital assemblage, proffering untold bounties of knowledge – and riches". This line of critique – the idea that Deleuze's ideas align all too well with the imperatives of contemporary capitalism – is hardly novel. Remember Slavoj Žižek's takedown of Gilles Deleuze, depicting the latter as "the ideologist of late capitalism" by zeroing in on his appreciation of surfing – the "Californian sport par excellence". (2004: 184) Still, Galloway's claims represent a new direction in this line of critique. Žižek implied that Deleuze's interest in surfing resonated with an emphasis on transgression and enjoyment, which serves as the perfect ideological companion for a late capitalism that has overcome "the logic of totalizing normality and adopted the logic of erratic excess" (184). Galloway, however, speaks less of *ideology*, but instead focuses on a particular *ethics*, that is joined with a surfing-inspired *aesthetic* of the sublime. Thus, when trying to label the intensification- and affirmation-oriented sensibility, Galloway suggests that "the best name would be the 'Red Bull sublime', to borrow Anne C. McCarthy's appealing formulation". As we shall see, the notion of the Red Bull sublime is a useful platform from which to move on from Galloway's concerns.

In her study of what she terms the Red Bull sublime, McCarthy (2017) analyses the extreme sport aesthetic found in media content produced by the eponymous Austrian beverage company. Interrogating skydiver Felix Baumgartner's 2012 jump from the stratosphere – a re-enactment of Kittinger's 1960 feat – along with other Red Bull-sponsored activities like big wave surfing, she claims that these activities are not mere promotional stunts. The aesthetic qualities of Red Bull's PR activities go beyond "the specific promotional mandate and give rise to a discourse that participates in a recognizably Romantic tradition" (McCarthy, 2017: 544) – that of the Romantic sublime. Contrary to the reading of "Dayvan Cowboy" sketched above, her argument points to a symmetry between stratospheric skydiving and big wave surfing. The two activities ought not to be juxtaposed, as they both signify an aesthetic of falling.

Again, we may recall Stranger's work on the sublime in relation to surfing. However, McCarthy points towards a different form of sublime, which suggests a break with the past. For while there are clear connections to the romantic sublime as normally construed – as "an ineffable experience of the infinite in the contemplation of terror and beauty in nature, as seen in say the Alps or stormy seas" (Stranger, 2011: 162) – there are also two significant deviations from traditional notions of the sublime: The Red Bull sublime recasts the relation between space and subjectivity, while also recasting the relation between nature, technology and the human.

First, the Red Bull sublime reorganizes the relation between the environment and the subject who experiences the sublime. The classic sublime is construed as an *ascent* to an elevated position, and this elevation is both physical and mental. When ascending the dizzying heights of the Alps, the subject is awarded with grand views of infinite nature, thus reaching a higher state of awareness. In contrast, the Red Bull sublime – as enacted in activities that range from "big wave surfing to skydiving and BASE jumping" (McCarthy, 2017: 547) – "reverses the traditional valuations of ascent and descent". In the romantic sublime, the descent was a matter of practicality – how to get down from a mountain after a great experience. In the Red Bull sublime, the rush of a fast descent down a wave or a mountain is valorized to the point of being *the* key moment.

Secondly, with regards to the relation between nature, technology and the human, McCarthy highlights how the capability to generate sublime experience through descent is facilitated by technological innovation. This holds true in surfing – note how the innovation of jet-ski-assisted tow-in surfing facilitated Hamilton's capacity to surf higher and faster waves. This implies that the equipment becomes an integral part of the Red Bull sublime's celebration of strange hybrids:

> Instead of policing boundaries – the boundary between the human body and its prostheses – the Red Bull sublime delights in unexpected combinations. It does not cast nature as a thing to be resisted or dominated, nor does it unquestioningly privilege stunts performed in the wild, as it were, over those that take place in urban settings. (544-545)

Therefore, the Red Bull sublime "rejects the ideology of nature as other (or nature as a site of profound sublime experience) that has long held sway in philosophical and popular representations". This implies that this form of the sublime stands in stark contrast to the surfing aesthetic charted by Stranger. The Red Bull sublime therefore represents an alternative sublime, existing alongside more traditional representations of an authentic and awesome nature. This begs the question: For how long have these two understandings of nature co-existed within surfing culture?

4. Surfing and the slow cancellation of nature

While McCarthy depicts the Red Bull sublime as a recent phenomenon, one may equally argue that surfing culture – at least as practiced in the rich world since the mid-20th century – can be understood as a gradual reconciliation with the loss of an authentic nature. This section will trace signs of this alternative sentiment within surfing culture.

The idea of a slow and gradual cancellation of the concept of nature is borrowed from Mark Fisher (2014). Following Franco "Bifo" Berardi, he has argued that members of the post-war generation have had to come to terms with "the slow cancellation of the future". Fisher and Berardi suggest that those who grew up in the sixties and seventies learned to believe in the idea about a future that would be radically different from the present. Subsequently, in the eighties and nineties, they were forced to cope with the end of history – the proposition that

the future will be like the present. Nevertheless, the memory of this lost future still haunts members of this generation.

Could it be that members of the surfing culture are similarly forced to cope with the end of nature, even though we are still haunted by the ghosts of authentic and pure nature? What if the allure of the *Endless Summer* sunset motif is not only about the finitude of our own individual selves, but equally about the finitude of the world as we know it?

The purpose of explicating this gloomy tradition in surfing culture is not to depress the reader: The aim is to show that this sentiment exists within surfing, and that it may inform an ethics that departs from the positive affirmativism that Galloway critiques. Indeed, this alternative depiction of surfing culture jars with the sun-kissed naiveite that dominates popular renderings of the culture. However, along with the sun-kissed surfer, a melancholic double has always been lurking on the sidelines. To put it in Beach Boys terms: Yes, there is the cliché joyfulness and youthfulness of *Surfing Safari* (1962), but there is also the death and decay of *Surf's Up* (1971). The message of the former is affirmative – "let's go surfing now". The message of the latter is negative – "don't go near the water", it is polluted, "touched by man". The former lists surf breaks in California, the latter contemplates the ruins of collapsed European empires. The former lives in the authentic moment, the latter knows that it is forever lost, and only exists as a fantasy.

As already hinted, the cancellation of nature in surfing culture has been a gradual process, and one domain in which to trace this is in surfing films. Indeed, they are "invaluable resources" that "have the potential to reveal aspects of the past and the present". (Booth, 1996: 324, see also Rutsky, 1999) A useful place to start is *Endless Summer* and the "surfing safari" film concept that emerged in its wake. For the contemporary viewer, painfully aware of the climate crisis, the idea of an endless summer is somewhat menacing. While most of its viewers in the late sixties were less attuned to this angle, the paradox that underlies the film should have been evident: In order to find the perfect wave – pure, unspoilt, authentic – significant levels of artifice had to be mobilized, notably air travel. Moreover, when the perfect wave is found at Cape St Francis on the Eastern coastline of South Africa, the narrator waxes lyrically over how it might as well have "been made by some kind of machine". (Roberts and Ponting, 2020: 230) In other words, already at the founding moment of post-war

Western surfing culture, the notion of artificiality looms large, threatening to crash into the ideal of pure nature.

In *Endless Summer II* (1994), this slow cancellation of nature has progressed further. When trying to re-capture the magical moment of finding Cape St Francis, the sequel delivers a devastating disenchantment of the world. Instead of the perfect wave, the film crew discovers a massive development of a thousand luxury homes and condos. The wave itself has been ruined by the settlement: Planted vegetation in the sand dunes prevents sand from blowing into the sea, making the reef uneven and rocky.

Given this awareness of environmental issues, and the fact that it emerged after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, it is perhaps surprising that *Endless Summer II* failed to engage with climate change. However, outside of surfing, in other "boarder cultures", there are examples of films that did. One particularly interesting example is snowboarding film *Riders on the Storm* (1992), which is not only based on the surfing safari concept – it also integrates climate change into its very premise. Much like *Endless Summer*, it is a yearlong travelling effort to create an endless winter, in which to search for deep powder. In the introduction, the viewer learns that this search is motivated by the compounding effects of climate change, El Niño, the hole in the ozone layer, and industrial pollution. At a couple of instances during the 68-minute film, the depressing proposition of endless summers (or at least shorter winters) is rearticulated. "Everybody have [sic] to stop driving their cars", one disgruntled protagonist concludes, before continuing his fossil-fueled search for powder. While the glaring irony of the whole enterprise is never articulated, there is at least an earnest tone that recognizes the loss of nature-as-we-new it as a legitimate problem. This is quite a feat, given the quasi-nihilist slacker *zeitgeist* on the rise in skateboarding culture, as epitomized by Jason Lee in Spike Jonze's 1991 *Video Days*.

So, to recapitulate: The letting-go of the belief in a pure, authentic nature-as-other has been a gradual process, which has slowly made its way into surfing culture's representation of the environment. This sentiment is also expressed in instances where there is not only a recognition of a loss of something that was once authentic, but where there is a suspicion that the authenticity never really existed in the first place. For instance, the most disturbing part of *Endless Summer II* is when the narrator suggests that Cape St Francis was always a fickle wave: The authentic perfect wave never existed in the first place. Similarly, the Beach Boys

song “Disney girls (1957)”, featuring on the 1971 *Surf’s Up* album, sounds like a straightforward homage to the authentic surfer culture of the late fifties and early sixties – a nostalgic memory of the culture that the Beach Boys had immortalized. However, more disturbingly, the reference to Disney’s “fantasy world” suggests that this authentic culture never existed.

This problematic has become more pronounced in the controversy around Kelly Slater’s surf ranch. As Michael Roberts and Jess Ponting suggest, the wave pool surfing phenomenon signals the rise of “the postmodern condition of surfing”, which “involves the destabilization of the binary paradigm nature/culture that has underpinned social constructions of authenticity” (2020: 231). In their analysis of this phenomenon, they highlight how Slater’s simulated wave has become the real that ocean-based waves are measured against. In this way, they argue, it is an instantiation of what Jean Baudrillard calls the “precession of simulacra” – a situation in which there is a “map that precedes the territory” (Baudrillard, 1994: 1).

Crucially, this recognition of an absence of authentic nature distinguishes this sentiment from the conservationist political position that is prevalent within surfing culture. Indeed, conservationism – a source of meaning and consolation for many members of the culture – is effectively undermined by the slow cancellation of nature. Continuing this conjecture, it is suggestive to consider the symmetry between Slater’s “bogus barrel” and Baudrillard’s description of Disneyland. For him, Disneyland is a construction that is easily dismissed as fake, allowing it to “mask the absence” of an authentic American dream society. It is “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (12). Similarly, one can understand the furore over Slater’s “bogus barrel” as a controversy that masks the unease that has haunted surfing culture since *Endless Summer*: The troubling suspicion that the much-revered authentic capital-N nature does not exist.

5. The toxic sublime and the aesthetic nature of politics

Aside from productions like *Surf’s Up*, this *unbehagen* in surfing culture is rarely expressed. Then again, as pointed out by McCarthy, the surfer or skydiver of the Red Bull sublime “is not given to introspection” (McCarthy, 2017: 547). He – the protagonist in the Red Bull universe is invariably male – is not a poet or philosopher. All he can say is that he is

"'stoked' about the next race, the next jump, the next surf contest" (548). Here, the protagonist's incapacity to speak intelligently about sublime experience places him squarely into the tradition of "verbal failure" as a characteristic of sublime experience.

Indeed, the sublime was long construed as an "encounter with the unspeakable", tied to linguistic, as well as cognitive, breakdown. This changed after Immanuel Kant. In contrast to classical accounts that understood the sublime as a quality inherent in nature, Kant placed the focus on the *subjective* experience of the sublime. This experience, he suggested, initially entails feelings of incomprehension, awe and fear. At this point, imagination is set free, but only temporarily, before reason steps in to recuperate it, allowing the subject to sober up and make sense of the situation. Thus, sublime experience is ultimately a reflection of the transcendence of the human mind. Here, again, the metaphor of ascent plays a crucial role: Physical elevation produces mental elevation. Nature "elevates our imagination", allowing the mind "to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature". (Kant, 1790: 121, cited in McCarthy, 2017, 545-546)

Different versions of this idea are prevalent within surfing culture. Remember "Bodhi" in Cathryn Bigelow's 1991 *Point Break* – the spiritual "searcher" who sees surfing as "a place to lose yourself and find yourself" (Palmås, 2009). This description is misleading – not simply because the Bodhi character is a cliché, but also because it tends to obfuscate the confusion that emerges when faced with the slow cancellation of nature. Arguably, surfing still represents an encounter with the sublime – but how does one describe a sublime that does not rely on nature-as-other? Here, we have to part company with McCarthy's wry reading of the Red Bull sublime, and look elsewhere for inspiration. Contemporary art has recently started to engage with contaminated environments, and according to Jennifer Peeples, this kind of art evokes a "toxic sublime". This emerges in situations where we are "recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe". (Peeple, 2011: 375)

Cultural theorist Carolyn Kane suggests that the toxic sublime forces us back to a pre-Kantian position, as "images of toxic waste, not pristine mountain ranges" (Kane, 2019: 214) put a question mark over Kant's idea of a recuperating faculty of reason. Instead, she argues, the experience of the toxic sublime can better be understood through Deleuze's revision of Kant. Deleuze rejects Kant's conviction that in the end, "the faculty of reason steps in to save

the day, rescuing the imagination from attempting to move too far from the limits of understanding": This step is "too neat and tidy for a world of constant breakdown and uncertainty". (190) Instead, the sublime leaves the subject in a position where reason fails to recuperate the imagination. When faced with the sublime, one's "entire structure of perception" explodes, to the point where one can "no longer recognize what the thing is" (190-191).

Deleuze's revision of Kant thus describes an experience of the sublime that cannot be "tamed" by reason – a sensory event that cannot be "explained away" by that which we already know. This is significant in the context of surfing culture's engagement with the slow cancellation of nature. For one, Deleuze's account goes some way to explain why this experience of surfing stands quietly alongside the sunnier mainstream renderings of surfing. Moreover, it also points towards political aspects of surfing culture's engagement with the toxic sublime. Given that aesthetic experience ruptures reason, it provokes the formation of new political sensibilities, which in turn may spark new political communities. In this way, "the aesthetic is not a sufficient condition for the political, but it is a necessary one" (Shaviro, 2007: 13). In *The Political Sublime*, Michael Shapiro shows how Deleuze shares this proposition with other contemporary theorists who have reworked Kant's account of the sublime:

> The political sensibility that emerges from the revisions of Kant's exploration of the aesthetic faculty is well summarized in Rancière's remark that "the aesthetic nature of politics" directs our attention not to "a specific single world" but to "a world of competing worlds." The attention-grabbing experience of the sublime therefore leads […] to an ethico-political sensibility that recognizes the fragilities of our grasp of experience and enjoins engagement with a pluralist world in which the in-common must be continually negotiated. (Shapiro, 2018: 4)

In this way, one can imagine the other, more melacholic side of surfing culture as a cultural practice that – along with many others – has grappled with a sense of disorientation produced by the loss of nature-as-we-knew-it. As a political process, this formation of a political sensibility is slow, and differs from historical instances of more straightforward political activism among surfers. In the case of the anti-apartheid activism charted by Laderman (2014), the professional surfers that boycotted South African contests formed a political

community, joining a larger and pre-existing community, following a readymade set of tactics, based on pre-formed sensibilities. In contrast, engagements with the toxic sublime may contribute to a new conception of our place in the world. Here, possible political outcomes are still uncertain and undetermined.

6. Another end of the world is possible

This chapter has argued that while traditional renderings of surf culture often present a sunkissed and stoked persona, a more melancholic double has long been lurking on the sidelines. The previous sections have sought to name and describe this other side of surfing culture. We know that there is a less affirmative and more melancholic Beach Boys – this last section will explore an alternative Deleuze as a suitable companion to this sentiment.

As Galloway points out, recent scholarship highlights that Deleuze's ethics (and aesthetics) are not solely about joyful affirmation – they can equally be oriented towards modes of thought that are less upbeat. In *Dark Deleuze*, Andrew Culp attempts to reconstruct Deleuze's work, rejecting the "canon of joy" that tends to be associated with his work. This is ultimately a matter of making Deleuzianism fit for the present age. Joyful affirmation was an untimely proposition back when Deleuze was producing his work, but this untimeliness has worn off in a time of "compulsory happiness, decentralized control, and overexposure" (Culp, 2016: 9). Indeed, the critiques of present-day Deleuzianism – such as those presented by Žižek and Galloway – can be understood as accusations of it being "timely, all too timely" (10). Therefore, a "new untimeliness" is required, which implies explicating "a negative project that [Deleuze's] work introduces but does not sustain: the Death of this World." (Culp, 2016: 49)

Culp suggests that Deleuze's ouvre can be understood in relation to three successive deaths: The death of God, the death of Man, and the death of the World. As we know from the work of Nietzsche and Foucault, pronouncements of such deaths are condemnations of modes of thought: "Each death denounces a concept as insufficient, critiques those who still believe in it, and demands its removal as an object of thought." Thus, we know that the "death of Man" rests on a critique of how the disciplines that spoke in the name of Humanity ended up overseeing exploitation, sexism, racism, poverty, violence, and war. "This world" that Culp wants to pronounce dead entails its social organization, as well as its ecological crises:

> Seen from this perspective, runaway climate change, the Sixth Extinction, and many other impending catastrophes are all essential parts of this world. The Death of this World admits the insufficiency of previous attempts to save it and instead poses a revolutionary gamble: only by destroying this world will we release ourselves of its problems. This does not mean moving to the moon, but that we give up on all the reasons given for saving the world. (Culp, 2016: 49)

Culp's argument chimes with current political sentiments: At the turn of the millennium, the slogan of global radical politics was that "another world is possible". Today, two decades on, it seems radicals are increasingly finding inspiration in another rallying call: "Another end of the world is possible".

This sentiment can be rephrased in terms that are more easily recognizable as Deleuzo-Guattarian; the call for a new earth. Indeed, recent scholarship in environmental philosophy accepts the idea that "the successful conservation of the earth might be dependent upon the creation of a new earth, a new way of conceiving and approaching the holistic entity that we call 'earth'" (Lundy, 2021: 119-120). This call is geographically situated in the relation between the earth, on the one hand, and territory, on the other. Territory implies an ordering – a series of habits and rhythms – that is overlaid on the earth. The new earth is the one where deterritorialization is absolute; where deterritorialization does not beget instant re-territorialization. This, in many ways, is the ultimate end of Deleuzo-Guattarian ethics: The call for a new earth is that which prompts the imperative to experiment with the capabilities of the material world.

In this way, Culp's "darker" Deleuzianism is in no way incompatible with an ethics of developing a craftsmanlike capability to tap the intensive properties of matter, as described above in relation to surfing. Nevertheless, this take on Deleuze – and on surfing culture – adds new layers to this ethic. First, it urges us to accept that the imperative to experiment simultaneously implies letting go of the world we once knew – and this includes putting the notion of the authentic, pure nature to rest. Secondly, it highlights how experimentation in the actual world need to be coupled with experiments in thought. Here, it is worth going back to Deleuze's own references to surfing.

In a 1985 interview, published as "Mediators", Deleuze mentions surfing in the context of the difference between what he called the *dogmatic image of thought*, and the *problematic image of thought* – that is, conceptions of what it means to think. Comparing "old sports" like shot-putting with surfing, he asks why our habits of thought are stuck in the ways of old sports.

> The kind of movements you find in sports and habits are changing. We got by for a long time with an energetic conception of motion, where there's a point of contact, or we are the source of movement. Running, putting the shot, and so on: effort, resistance, with a starting point, a lever. But nowadays we see movement defined less and less in relation to a point of leverage. All the new sports – surfing, windsurfing, hang-gliding – take the form of entering into an existing wave. There's no longer an origin as starting point, but a sort of putting-into-orbit. The key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to 'get into something' instead of being the origin of an effort. (Deleuze, 1995: 121)

This description maps onto the dogmatic-vs-problematic schema. Thus, a dogmatic, shot-putter-inspired conception of thought is one where the thinker seeks a position of no presuppositions. Thought becomes a question of finding the correct angle from which to enter a problem – a search for an external, *apriori* foundation that will act as a point of leverage. The problematic mode of thought does not seek such a foundation, and instead accepts being submerged in the middle of a problem. Much like surfing, this mode of thought is at the mercy of its *milieu*.

This argument can productively be transposed to the context of environmental politics. This chapter has argued that surfing culture has long been torn between believing and disbelieving in the idea of nature-as-other, and this is by no means politically insignificant: There are those who argue that there are good political reasons for retaining the idea of capital-N Nature. Here, then, the idea of Nature acts as the stable ground from which to begin analyzing the problem of climate change, a foundation on which to insert a pre-existing theoretical wedge. The alternative, problematic approach implies starting from the *milieu* of climate change – for instance through experiences of the toxic sublime.

Does this not mean placing an undue emphasis on experience, rather than analytic thought? Does this not mean pinning too high hopes on the capacity for surfing culture – and other

cultures engaging with the toxic sublime – to form new political sensibilities and political communities? Perhaps. Perhaps the business of thinking about ecological crisis should be left to professionals – to those who look for points of leverage for pre-existing abstractions, to those for whom thinking is about recognizing the world through such pre-existing constructs. This is congruent with what Deleuze terms a dogmatic image of thought, which holds that thinking is a natural faculty of the mind, which tends towards truth. Such thought is ultimately a process of recognizing the world through abstractions, and this process to be sheltered from distractions, not least by the physical world of bodies and passions.

The problematic image of thought, on the other hand, holds that experience is precisely that which prompts thought. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze posits: "Something in the world forces us to think". (Deleuze, 1994: 139). This something is an *encounter*, which "can only be sensed" and is thus "opposed to recognition". In other words, there is no such thing as voluntary, unprovoked thought – "there is only involuntary thought" (175). It only emerges in the encounter with the strange, or the vague – that which cannot easily be recognized and placed in a category. Arguably, it is precisely this kind of strangeness that the alternative, melancholic side of surfing culture has been struggling with all along.

An affirmativist reading of Deleuze can be translated into slogans for how to experiment with the world – such as "pursue difference, produce difference!" (Palmås, 2009). In contrast, Culp's reading of Deleuze compels us to withdraw, while forging new weapons of thought. Granted, this may sound frustratingly noncommittal. In his recent discussion on Deleuze and Guattari's call for a new earth, Craig Lundy concedes that those who seek to turn this call into a political position or program will most likely be disappointed. Any how-to list is destined to be dismissed as "inadequate if not laughable" (Lundy, 2021: 135). The call for a new earth is ultimately an imperative to problematize reality, and thus act "counter to the past, and therefore on the present, for the benefit, let us hope, of a future". (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 112, cited in Lundy, 2021: 137)

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