

International Review for the Sociology of Sport

<http://irs.sagepub.com/>

THE AESTHETICS OF RISK : A Study of Surfing

Mark Stranger

International Review for the Sociology of Sport 1999 34: 265

DOI: 10.1177/101269099034003003

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://irs.sagepub.com/content/34/3/265>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[International Sociology of Sport Association](#)

Additional services and information for *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://irs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://irs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://irs.sagepub.com/content/34/3/265.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 1, 1999

[What is This?](#)

THE AESTHETICS OF RISK

A Study of Surfing

Mark Stranger

University of Tasmania, Australia

Abstract A combination of participant-observation, survey research, interviews, and semiotics was used to examine risk-taking in Australian surfing. It is argued that: (1) aestheticization facilitates risk-taking in the pursuit of an ecstatic, transcendent experience; and (2) the surfing aesthetic involves a postmodern incarnation of the sublime that distorts rational risk assessment. The study also analyzes the role of the surfing media in constructing and reinforcing images of the sublime.

Key words • aestheticization • postmodernity • risk-taking • sublime • surfing

Some fell in love with life
 And drank it from the fountain
 That was pouring like an avalanche
 Coming down the mountain
 (Butthole Surfers, 'Pepper' on Electriclarryland)

High-risk leisure is a feature of contemporary society. Efforts to explain this phenomenon in sociological terms have tended to concentrate on the cathartic properties of risk-taking in the context of the uncertainty inherent in the current rapid rate of social change (Giddens, 1991; Lyng, 1990). While these approaches have merit, they fail to account adequately for embodied experiences — the thrill involved in risk-taking. This is like explaining human sexual behavior in terms of the 'afterglow'. Huizinga's (1949: 2) complaint against a functionalist approach to play in the 1930s is just as valid here: 'Most of them only deal incidentally with the question of what play is *in itself* and what it means to the player.' Thus, he insists that any study of play must first pay attention to its 'profoundly aesthetic quality'.

Elias and Dunning (1986) do acknowledge the importance of the thrill experienced in sport, but two fundamental elements of their model are substantially missing in high-risk leisure: (1) the 'collective effervescence' they claim is central to the catharsis experienced at a modern sporting event (risk-taking leisure is typically an individualistic pursuit and spectators are not a necessary component); and (2) the 'controlled de-controlling' entailed in the

mimetic process that ensures the excitement of the battlefield without the danger (the existence of danger is an integral component of high-risk leisure). As Frey (1991: 142) observes: 'As a sport becomes rationalized, risk is reduced in reality and by perception. Presumably risk, daring, and uncertainty have no place in modern society, and, therefore, no place in sport'. The inherent individualism and orientation towards danger in high-risk leisure does not fit the model of modern, rational sport; at least in its unregulated forms.

One way of understanding these risk-taking leisure activities is flagged by Elias (1986: 26), who says that 'studies of sport which are not studies of society are studies out of context'. Following this dictum, as well as Huizinga's plea to give priority to the aesthetic experience of play, this article provides a model for understanding the current popularity of high-risk sports. This is done by first looking at risk-taking leisure as an activity that is rewarding in and of itself; and, second, by linking risk-taking leisure with the postmodern mode of aestheticization. Surfing is used as a case study of a culture that is oriented toward risk-taking. This study refers specifically to the surfing culture in Australia that revolves around the playful act of wave riding, predominantly on surfboards, as distinct from the surf lifesaving culture (Pearson, 1979).

Methods

The data for this study came from a 10-month field trip to surfing locations around Australia. Following the interactionist tradition, which acknowledges that a researcher 'is best able to chart those areas in which he [sic] is already an accredited member' (Rock, 1979: 214), I used my 30 years of experience as a surfer to gain access to the surfing culture beneath the commodified surface. I stayed at 15 *general locations* for between one to eight weeks, traveling to a range of specific *surfing sites* in each area. These locations included the crowded beaches of Sydney, Perth, and Queensland's Sunshine Coast; selected coastal towns in the states of Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia, and South Australia; isolated desert surfing camps in Western Australia and South Australia; the cold climate sites around Hobart in Tasmania; and surfing industry locations in all six states, with a particular focus on Torquay in Victoria — a popular surfing locale and a significant surfing industry site. In each location, I undertook a participant-observation role by first going surfing in order to establish my credentials as a journeyman surfer and then striking up conversations with fellow surfers. The aims of my study were always made clear to all of the surfers whom I surveyed or interviewed. I recorded significant events, cultural phenomena, and conversations in my field notes at each site.

I also tape-recorded interviews that lasted about one to two hours with 28 men and three women who were key figures at the international, national or local level (the gender imbalance reflects that within the surfing culture, especially at the elite level). The interviews were guided by open-ended questions that varied depending on the interviewee's area of expertise and experience. I also administered a questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended questions to 116 male and 13 female surfers at 18 surfing sites. The instrument was

designed to elicit general information about the surfing scene (e.g. demographics, attitudes, and behavior). A minimum of 10 percent of those actually observed surfing at any one site was surveyed via 'purposive sampling' (Babbie, 1989: 204), according to gender, age, surfing experience, competitive involvement, and type of surfcraft. The aim of the survey was not to provide an accurate representation of the larger surfing population, but to sample a full range of *surfer* types at a full range of *surfing locations*, thus providing basic quantitative data on the common themes and cultural differences across the population. Information about the surfing scene was also obtained from books by and about surfers, and from a purposive sample of surfing videos and magazines from the 1960s until the present, with a particular focus on magazines produced since 1994. This aspect of the study involved a thematic analysis of both the development and nature of the surfing aesthetic.

In the following sections I use some of the data that was collected via these methods to examine the importance of the search for thrills in surfers' orientations toward risk-taking, and some links between the current popularity of risk-taking leisure and the postmodern mode of aestheticization. I next analyze some relationships between the fear and thrills experienced in surfing and the emergence of a postmodern appreciation of the sublime in nature. I then investigate how experiences of the union between an individual and waves is manifest in media representations of the sublime, and the manner in which the images of the sublime can act upon the surfer's 'faculty of desire' to override concerns for personal safety. Finally, I discuss the implications of these various motifs for understanding some of the connections among self-transcendence, dedifferentiation, and the surfing aesthetic within a postmodern theoretical framework.

Risk in Surfing

Following Huizinga, I examine the 'aesthetic quality' of surfing and argue that the search for thrills is important in surfers' orientation toward risk-taking. I also maintain that the thrill involved is inherent to the experience of self-transcendence. Surfing is a risk-taking leisure activity; not because it has a high fatality rate or results in serious injuries, but because it is pursued primarily for the thrills involved — a quest that typically entails critical levels of risk. In their study of adolescent subcultures, Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1985: 99) concluded that surfers 'lived for the thrill'. In response to an open-ended question about motives, 81 percent of the respondents in my study indicated that thrill was an impetus for surfing.

Although 'risk-taking' and 'thrill-seeking' are not synonymous, the link between the two in surfing is clear. For instance, all interviewees agreed that the thrills they initially experienced in small surf became harder to capture as their skill level improved. Some of the most experienced surfers reported that, although they could still find satisfaction in smaller waves, the thrill achieved was not as intense. The desire to replicate these intense thrills results in the search for larger, more challenging waves. As Mike put it: 'It's like a drug. You get the

thrill fairly easily at first, but then it becomes harder to achieve and you have to ride larger and larger waves in order to get that feeling again.’¹

Typically, surfers do not *consciously* strive to increase the level of risk — it is simply a by-product of chasing the most intense thrills. The risk-taking inherent in this imperative for achieving satisfying levels of thrills is what distinguishes surfing as a risk-taking leisure activity: ‘The level’s always growing as to what’s BIG. What’s big is what’s going to get me that feeling . . . But still, I’m not out there because of this challenge with fear. It’s fun. I love it’ (surfer in Lyon and Lyon, 1997: 180).

Accounts of the nature of the thrill in risk-taking leisure activities often emphasize ecstatic feelings of oneness with the environment, the loss of self in the activity, and an intense awareness of the moment. In surfing culture, these moments of harmony with the ocean are a part of the folklore and vocabulary. Being ‘stoked’ is a term that is frequently used to describe the ‘high’ that surfing can provide.²

From a psychological perspective Freud (1962) interpreted ‘oceanic’ feelings of ‘oneness with the universe’ as manifestations of an individual’s memory of ‘primary ego-feelings’ before the ego became separated from the external world. Balint developed Freud’s interpretation further, claiming that we all strive to regain this ‘primal harmony’. One means of achieving this is by taking risks. Balint (1959: 87) calls these risk-takers ‘philobats’: ‘In order to regain the illusion of the friendly expanses, to experience the thrill, [the philobat] has to leave the zone of safety and expose himself [sic] to hazards representing the original trauma.’ For a philobat, the greater the danger that is faced and conquered the greater the thrill that is achieved, and the thrill ensues from feeling at one with the external world. This harmonious identity is achieved ‘not only in fantasy, but also to a great extent, in reality’ (Balint, 1959: 86). One of Simmel’s social types, ‘The Adventurer’, fits Balint’s philobatic type very closely. Because the adventure stands both over and against the continuity of ordinary life, Simmel believes that it is like art, and so can reveal the ‘secret unities’ that are separated under rational analysis: ‘the adventurer of genius lives, as if by mystic instinct, at the point where the course of the world and the individual fate have, so to speak, not yet been differentiated from one another’ (Simmel, 1971: 195).

Although not addressing risk-taking specifically, Huizinga’s concept of ‘sacred play’ is another approach which resonates with the views of Balint and Simmel. For Huizinga, play predates civilization (*sub specie ludi*) and can become lost under the cultural complexities of modernity: ‘In the form and function of play, itself an independent entity which is senseless and irrational, man’s consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression’ (Huizinga, 1949: 17).

While Balint and Simmel have linked risk-taking and the transcendence of self in harmony with the external world, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) have developed the concept of ‘flow’, to explain the psychic process whereby this transcendence occurs. Flow theorists argue that the achievement of these ecstatic moments — which they call optimal experience — can be understood in terms of a harmonious match between challenge and skill, where there is a ‘merging of activity and awareness’:

Because of the deep concentration on the activity at hand, the person in flow . . . loses temporarily the awareness of self. . . . At the most challenging levels, people actually report experiencing a *transcendence* of self . . . The climber feels at one with the mountain, . . . The mountaineer does not climb in order to reach the top of the mountain, but tries to reach the summit in order to climb. (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988: 33)

The Csikszentmihalyis also claim that the ‘true’ self is manifest in the experience of flow, and ‘[b]ecause the tendency of the self is to reproduce itself . . . to keep on experiencing flow becomes one of the central goals of the self’ (1988: 24). But they note that in order to do so, ‘it is necessary to take on a slightly greater challenge, and to develop slightly greater skills’ (1988: 367). Similarly, most surfers and participants in other high-risk sports (Celsi et al., 1993) described the thrills they achieve as having an addictive quality. In surfing, this union between surfer and environment can occur when the breaking wave pushes surfers’ abilities to the point where they have to perform automatically. According to Wayne:

When you abandon yourself to the rhythm of the wave and become part of that rhythm you get that arrested time . . . The ecstatic moment is increased in intensity with an increase in size and the critical nature of the wave . . . If you have a conscious thought you eat it.

Risk and Aestheticization

Flow theory suggests that a unifying experience cannot be achieved without the actions having significant meanings for the participant: ‘Activities that are trivial in substance or beyond the control of actors do not facilitate flow’ (Mitchell, 1988: 54). Similarly for Simmel (1971), the ‘adventure’ had to have meaning for the participant and connect with their character and identity in order for it to provide a transcendent experience. While we can rationalize risk-taking in terms of various efficacies, like catharsis and character-building, along the lines of the ‘rational recreationists’ of early modernity, or Beck’s (1992) and Giddens’s (1991) reflexive risk managers, Mitchell (in line with Simmel and Huizinga) claims that the instrumentally rational language involved here restricts our ability to articulate the experience itself. Thus, the esoteric is explained away in the rational disenchantment of everyday life. This, Mitchell argues, has the potential to inhibit the flow experience. In contrast, the aesthetic reflexivity that Lash (1993) describes as integral to contemporary culture — with its emphasis on the body and the physical experience as part of the reflexive self — enables the sensual and emotional experience to be recognized as inherently worthwhile, without having to be justified in terms of efficacious outcomes. There is nothing particularly new about risk-taking as a leisure activity. But as Balint (1959) pointed out some four decades ago, there has been a steady increase in participation since the middle of the 19th century. Today the participation rate seems to be on the increase (Celsi et al, 1993). The link this paper makes between risk-taking leisure and aesthetics is also well established; Kant (1952: 116) recognized it in the mountaineering exploits of Sassure. The emergence of alpinism during the romantic period can be seen as an aesthetic reaction to the dehumanizing rationalism of industrialization; an aesthetic which encompassed an *appreciation* of the sublime in nature and valued *communion* with nature — an aesthetic reaction of

the late 18th and the 19th century to the dehumanizing rationalism of industrialization.

The current level of aestheticization is such that many commentators now see the trend as overwhelming, with 'reality as a whole . . . coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction to us' (Welsch, 1996: 1). According to Featherstone (1993: 272), aestheticization, through the culture industry, produces a rapid flow of signs and images, which saturate everyday life to such a degree that they 'defy systematization and narrativity'. In response to this cacophony of sensory stimulation, postmodern culture involves an aesthetic of *sensation*, replacing the increasingly impossible demands of modernity for rational *interpretation*. Following Lyotard, Lash (1991) describes it as a 'figural' culture rather than one based on discourse. Thus, the allocation of 'meaning' to risk-taking behavior is not so much an intellectual process as an affectual one that is based on desire rather than the ego; images rather than words — what Lash (1993: 10) likens to a 'Kantian intuition' rather than a 'Kantian logic'. Aesthetic reflexivity, figural regimes, and the aestheticization of everyday life, thus give primacy to sensual experience: an environment conducive to the development of significant meaning in risk-taking behavior. This meaningfulness involves a *feeling* that participation in the activity is good in itself. This also has implications for the connections among thrill-seeking, risk-taking behavior and sublime experiences.

Sacred Play and Surfing's Postmodern Sublime

An appreciation of the sublime in nature came to the fore towards the end of the 18th century and involved an experience of the infinite in the contemplation of terror and beauty, as seen, in say, the Alps or stormy seas:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature* . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on the object which employs it. (Burke, 1958: 57)

The similarity between the *experience* of flow and the *appreciation* of the romantic sublime is clear. In the latter the mind of the observer is so overwhelmed by the object of its gaze that no rationalizing thought can intrude. In surfing it is a total engagement of psychic capacities in a physical challenge that facilitates the ecstatic union with nature. For example, Pam told me that, 'You lose yourself tapping a power that's greater than you, like your riding that wave of power literally; you become part of it.' Clearly evident in the surfer's aesthetic appreciation of the waves is the image of nature as power, which Kant (1952) classifies as a 'dynamically sublime' judgement, 'caused by an interplay of the imagination and desire' (Korner, 1955: 191).

The sublime is not an inherent property of the object, which Kant believes we are more naturally disposed to consider awesome and horrible, but a subjective appreciation based on ideas. The ideas upon which such judgements rest are not to be employed in rational analysis, but provide a source of meaning which enables the actor to intuit the sublime quality of the object. Kant (1952: 116)

claims that culture plays a significant role in generating the ideas which facilitate the 'transcendence of self beyond nature', but he qualifies this cultural influence, claiming that the foundations of these 'moral feelings' are to be found in human nature, and so it is the role of culture to provide access to these innate feelings.

If we return to the theories of Freud (1962) and Balint (1959), we can find a source for Kant's innate moral feelings in the infant's experience of 'primal harmony', of oneness with the whole. This is also the case with Huizinga's (1949) concept of *sub specie ludi*. The ideas necessary to access this moral source of sublime appreciation have been a part of surfing culture from the early days of its modern renaissance at least. As has been noted, the experience of surfing has a history of being interpreted in terms of a 'communion with nature'.

In analyzing the sublime, Wood (1972: 210) concluded that different forms emerge, 'depending on the cultural milieu involved, which fosters its own values and concepts, and symbolizations thereof'. Lyotard (1984) draws on Kant for his concept of a postmodern sublime — the essence of which is the intrinsic, strong, and equivocal combination of pleasure and pain. This is consistent with surfing's embodied 'experience' of the sublime:

Big Sunset [Beach] reminded me of the double-sidedness of surfing. . . . You are simultaneously propelled by the wave and pursued by it. The best position is the worst; the greatest power is closest to the curl. Apotheosis and annihilation are separated by the narrowest of margins. (Martin, 1991: 35)

While the romantic sublime required distance between the subject and object, this is clearly not the case in surfing. As Lash (1991: 175) points out, postmodern subjects are not inclined to maintain a distance from their objects of desire, because the postmodern figural regime 'operates through the spectator's immersion, the relatively unmediated investment of his/her desire in the cultural object'. This mode of involvement is particularly apposite to surfing, and — the distinction between an appreciation of the sublime and the experience of flow is not so easily maintained — surfers *experience* the sublime in union with the object of their *appreciation* of the sublime:

When you paddle out and see a [10 meter high wave] staring you in the face, it's like 'Oh my God' . . . Being a surfer and being involved with nature all the time gives you a different understanding of where you might find God. (Surfer in *Metaphysical*, 1997)

This dedifferentiated process blurs the boundaries between the imagined and reality — between the experience of the infinite in the *image* and in the *act*; between the sign and the signifier — and is indicative of a distinctly postmodern hyperreality.

One important consequence of this symbiotic relationship between the dedifferentiated experience/appreciation of the sublime is the distortion of any rational risk assessment: The object of assessment is also the object of an appreciation of the sublime in which fear and desire merge. This *appreciation* of the sublime is itself dedifferentiated from the sublime *experience* where pleasure and pain merge. Unless the object is so terrifying as to unhinge this sublime synthe-

sis of emotions, the likely outcome from such aesthetic judgements of risk is a sublime appreciation *of* the object and the desire for engagement *with* it.

Representations of the Sublime in Surfing

A common theme among the interviewees and in publications (Carroll and Wilcox, 1994; Stell, 1992; Versace, 1993) is that both print and electronic images of surfing have had a considerable influence on people's conversions to a surfing lifestyle and their engagement with a surfing aesthetic. The surfers in my survey had bought an average of 9.27 magazines and watched 10.3 *different* videos (an indeterminate number of times) in the past year. Collections of surfing magazines are pored over countless times and favorite images adorn the walls of their homes and beyond. Videos are watched repeatedly, either as whole programs or in fragmented snippets, as viewers search for their favorite sequences or watch short segments as the whim and opportunity coincide. The videos lend themselves to this kind of usage, as many have no narration and consist solely of surfing sequences that are 'choreographed' to contemporary rock music. Despite being fragmented, these viewing patterns usually involve an intense degree of concentration: 'The surf film audience typically move their bodies in unison with the surfer on the screen in a state of aesthetic identity' (Flynn, 1987: 411). Contrary to McLuhan's (1964) assessment of TV, the surfing video — as watched by surfers — is an example of a 'hot' rather than a 'cool' medium:

I remember in one movie Gerry Lopez [was] surfing Pipeline . . . [with] a backlit effect . . . If I saw a tube as I was paddling out, especially if it was backlit, I'd imagine it was Pipeline . . . I would really focus on getting myself in the right position and pulling into the tube. It didn't matter whether the wave was going to close out and I'd get stomped and thrashed around, it was really just taking off and getting into that situation just to experience that 'Lopez' moment'. (Carroll and Wilcox, 1994: 12–13).

Following Wood (1972), and Kant's (1952) insistence on cultural influence as a prerequisite for an appreciation of the sublime in nature, we should expect representations of the sublime to reflect the culture from which the recognition emerges. The dedifferentiation which occurs between surfer and wave — culture and nature — in the experience of flow, provides the basis for representations of the sublime to include the presence of a cultural element. The typically romantic image of awesome, empty waves is still a common one in the surfing media, but the appreciation of the sublime is also possible when the image of a surfer is portrayed on one of these waves. In fact, it is reasonable to suggest that, for a surfer, the image of someone riding a wave can enhance its sublimity. Since in surfing the 'ideas' behind the appreciation of the sublime coalesce around a dedifferentiation between the surfer and the wave in the experience of flow, it follows that representations of surfing would stimulate the imagination to a recognition of the sublime most adequately.

The surfing media's images of the sublime excite the memory of the ecstatic experience of union achieved in surfing, and like erotic images, stimulate

the desire invested in them. In fact, it is not uncommon for surfing to be described as being like sex (as distinct from being a sexual experience). There are several important similarities between these two activities: the sensual nature of both acts; the ecstatic experience and cathartic release that can be achieved; and how the attendant aesthetics act on the individuals' 'faculty of desire'. One interviewee, Mike, described the image of a perfect wave as 'like a beautiful woman lifting her skirt'. In the same way that the figural representation of the sexually erotic form can serve to subjugate the rational — the super ego to the desires of the id — the beautiful and the sublime images in surfing's aesthetic operate at the level of desire (according to Lash, 1991: 174, desire exists in the postmodern context 'on the very "surface" of a now largely dedifferentiated psychic apparatus'). Increased levels of desire serve to counter greater levels of fear, and in this way the surfing aesthetic and the surfing media help facilitate greater levels of risk-taking through the aestheticization of risk assessment. As Red explained, the beauty of the wave draws surfers in: 'If the wave is perfect you'll go out no matter how big it is.'

This desire does not so much prevent the awareness of risk involved, as override the concern. The risk, although recognized, only becomes an issue when the 'terrible' aspect of the sublime looms large enough to subjugate the surfer's desire. The hyperreal habitat created by surfing's aesthetic neutralizes less terrifying experiences within the dedifferentiated cocoon of the sublime. But somewhere along the continuum of increasing danger, the experience of pain and fear *redifferentiate* from their sublime union with pleasure and desire, and the aesthetic judgement of risk turns on an overwhelming sense of fear.

Discussion

The risk orientation of surfing is inherent in a chase for the thrill of self-transcendence. Moreover, the postmodern processes of aestheticization facilitate this apparently irrational behavior. Integral to this aestheticization in surfing culture, and at the heart of the surfing aesthetic, is an *appreciation* of the sublime which simulates the sublime *experience* of flow. The postmodern nature of surfing's sublime is such that the distinction between the appreciation and the experience becomes blurred. This dedifferentiation between the sign and signifier distorts any rational assessment of risk. Images of the sublime act upon the surfer's 'faculty of desire', and in combination with the aestheticized perception of risk, override or circumvent the fear of personal harm.

Surfing involves an experience of self-transcendence that is shared via the interaction of local participants and mediated through the global dissemination of images of the sublime. A thorough analysis of this *conscience collective* and the social formations which develop around it is the basis of another article, but suffice to say that the processes of aestheticization outlined here provide the environment in which the self can become anchored in transcendent experiences of unity with nature, and in the more stable lifestyle groups which form around the activities that provide them. The transcendence of self within a community, which itself is based on the shared experience of an expanded sense of self, is a

far cry from the fragmented, isolated, and depthless selves which postmodernity threatens to produce (Bauman, 1991).

I am confident that this postmodern theoretical framework will be applicable to similar risk-oriented leisure activities. Aestheticization plays a pivotal role in providing an environment in which such autotelic activities can be considered meaningful — free from the need for rational justification. It follows therefore that experiences of self-transcendence will become more accessible in a post-modernizing world. It is important to note, however, that such experiences are not contingent upon *any* level of risk. The primary aim of some meditative techniques, for example, is to transcend the self. Risk is not even a necessary factor in the achievement of transcendence through flow; the challenge to skill can be on an intellectual level. Risk is simply a very effective catalyst for reaching these transcendent states. And as noted previously, experienced surfers report an ability to achieve such states in relatively small waves. Consequently, the opportunity for appreciating the sublime appears to extend beyond the image of the terrible and the beautiful. For example, those surfers who have learned to lose themselves in ecstatic moments of flow riding smaller waves will also appreciate the sublime in images which replicate this experience (see, for example, any longboarding magazines or videos). Such a judgement might cut across all Kantian categories — goodness, agreeableness, and beauty — *except* the sublime, since the object contains no significant element of awesome power or fear. Further, it follows that there is also the potential for incarnations of a fear and pain-free sublime (with varying degrees of intensity), specific to the countless lifestyle groups which form around activities providing transcendent experience: from belly-dancers and their social configurations to cigarette smokers and the neo-tribes (Maffesoli, 1996) that form momentarily outside their smoke-free offices. This freeing up of the sublime is a clear example of the dedifferentiation of high and low culture attributed to postmodern aestheticization (Crook et al., 1992).

But as Huizinga (1949: 19) said, 'In play we may move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it — in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred.' An appreciation of the postmodern sublime would appear to be contingent upon the accident of cultural interpretation of transcendent experience as 'sacred' — of accessing Kant's (1952) 'innate moral feelings'. Hyperindividualistic, amoral hedonism remains a distinct possibility in this heterotopian and polysemic postmodern environment, as the following quote from a professional surfer attests: 'I surf for the same reason I perpetually flog myself to the heights of orgasmic pleasure — because it feels good' (Booth, 1995: 205).

Notes

1. The interviewees quoted were: Mike (pioneer surfer, businessman); Pam (ex-World Champion, professional woman surfer); Red (male aged 25; experienced surfer; long-term desert camp resident); Wayne (counter-culture legend, prominent surfer, surfboard maker).
2. Here is a glossary of surfing terms:

Close out: A wave that breaks all at once, leaving no unbroken wave face on which the surfer can ride.

Curl: The point where the breaking part of a wave meets the unbroken face — the most powerful part of the wave.

Longboard: Surfboards based on the designs of the early 1960s; they are longer, wider and thicker, and as a result, easier to use in less challenging surf.

Pipeline: A powerful surf spot in Hawaii where the surf breaks on a shallow reef and creates very hollow tube-shaped waves.

Stoked: Originally it described the ecstatic reaction to a surfing session or a particular ride. Today it is also used more loosely to describe a general state of positive excitement.

Tube: A wave that pitches ahead of itself when it breaks, creating a hollow cylindrical shape. Surfing inside the tube is considered by most surfers to be the 'ultimate'.

References

- Babbie, E. (1989) *The Practice of Social Research* (5th edn). Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Balint, M. (1959) *Thrills and Regressions*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1991) *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Booth, D. (1995) 'Ambiguities in Pleasure and Discipline: The Development of Competitive Surfing', *Journal of Sport History* 22: 189–206.
- Burke, E. (1958) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Carroll, T. and Wilcox, K. (1994) *The Wave Within*. Sydney: Ironbark.
- Celsi, R., Rose, R. and Leigh, T. (1993) 'An Exploration of High-risk Leisure Consumption through Skydiving', *Journal of Consumer Research* 20: 1–23.
- Crook, S., Pakulski, J. and Waters, M. (1992) *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society*. London: Sage.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Csikszentmihalyi, I.S., eds (1988) *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elias, N. (1986) 'Introduction', in N. Elias and E. Dunning (eds) *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, N. and Dunning, E., eds (1986) *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Featherstone, M. (1993) 'Postmodernism and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life', in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds) *Modernity and Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Flynn, P. (1987) 'Waves of Semiosis: Surfing's Iconic Progression', *The American Journal of Semiotics* 5: 397–418.
- Freud, S. (1962) *Civilization and its Discontents*. New York: Norton.
- Frey, J. (1991) 'Social Risk and the Meaning of Sport', *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8: 136–45.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1949) *Homo Ludens*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kant, I. (1952) *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Korner, S. (1955) *Kant*. London: Penguin.
- Lash, S. (1991) *Sociology of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.
- Lash, S. (1993) 'Reflexive Modernization: The Aesthetic Dimension', *Theory, Culture and Society* 10: 1–23.
- Lyng, S. (1990) 'Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking', *American Journal of Sociology* 95: 851–86.
- Lyon, C. and Lyon, L. (1997) *Jaws Maui*. Hawaii: Peter Cannon.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Maffesoli, M. (1996) *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.
- Martin, A. (1991) *Walking on Water*. London: John Murray.
- Metaphysical: Surfing on a Higher Level* (1997) Video. Sydney: Quiksilver International.
- Mitchell, R. (1988) 'Sociological Implications of the Flow Experience', in M. Csikszentmihalyi and I.S. Csikszentmihalyi (eds) *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pearson, K. (1979) *Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Rock, P. (1979) *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism*. London: Macmillan.
- Schwendinger, H. and Schwendinger, J. (1985) *Adolescent Subcultures and Delinquency*. New York: Praeger.
- Simmel, G. (1971) *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stell, M.K. (1992) *Pam Burrridge*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- Versace, K. (1993) 'Fashion and Fanatics: The Cultural Transmission of Surfing in Ipswich Queensland', unpublished MA thesis, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Welsch, W. (1996) 'Aestheticization Processes: Phenomena, Distinctions and Prospects', *Theory, Culture and Society* 13: 1–24.
- Wood, T. (1972) *The Word 'Sublime' and its Context 1650 – 1760*. The Hague: Mouton.

Mark Stranger is a consultant sociologist. This article draws on his doctoral research, which was undertaken through the University of Tasmania's School of Sociology and Social Work. He has worked as a tutor in the field of social change theory, cultural studies, and sport, leisure and tourism.

Address: School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania, GPO Box 252–17, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia. Email: stranger@utas.edu.au