

DON'T GO NEAR THE WATER

J. Hoberman
on *Jaws*ⁿ

INHUMAN, UNSLEEPING, omnivorous, a machine triggered by the scent of blood. . . . It was with *Jaws* that the culture industry truly began to contemplate itself.

Twenty years ago this month, a week before Steven Spielberg's movie went into production on Martha's Vineyard using three mechanical sharks—collectively nicknamed "Bruce"—powered with pneumatic engines and launchable by a 65-foot catapult, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a detailed analysis of "the making of a best-seller." The article tracked the development of the novel *Jaws*, from Peter Benchley's initial one-page outline through the completion of the manuscript, the choice of a title, the development of cover art, the creation of a sales pitch, to the climax—a wild auction for the paperback rights, a full nine months before the hardcover would appear. Since the film rights had also been sold before the novel's February 1974 publication, the entire period of *Jaws*' best-sellerdom—much of which coincided with the making of the movie—

could itself be considered a giant publicity trailer for a work-in-progress.

Released in June 1975, at 460 theaters simultaneously, on an unprecedented wave of TV advertising, *Jaws* was everywhere at once. The film needed only 78 days to surpass *The Godfather* as the top-grossing movie of all time (at least until 1977, and *Star Wars*). By then, Americans had already purchased 2 million *Jaws* tumblers, half a million *Jaws* T-shirts, and tens of thousands of *Jaws* posters, beach towels, bike bags, blankets, and hosiery, as well as shark costumes, costume jewelry, hobby kits, iron-on transfers, board games, charms, pajamas, bathing suits, water squirters, shark's-tooth pendants, inflatable sharks . . . etc. *Jaws* was the greatest marketing bonanza since the 1955 Davy Crockett craze. The summer beaches themselves were a virtual-reality billboard for the film (a beneficial side-effect of its extended production schedule—Universal had originally hoped to release it the pre-

ceding Christmas): both *Time* and the *New York Times* reported that "formerly bold swimmers now huddle in groups a few yards offshore," while "waders are peering timorously into the water's edge."

Could advertising explain this orgy of participation? *Newsweek* noted that "the spell seemed larger than its merchandising hype alone could account for." In a particularly self-conscious way, the movie's box-office appeal fed into itself, transforming a hit movie into something larger, a new form of feedback and a new model for the movies. *Jaws* was precisely the post-TV multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk* predicted by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in which "all the elements of the production, from the novel (shaped with an eye to the film) to the last sound effect," would be totally integrated: "The movie-makers distrust any manuscript which is not reassuringly backed by a best-seller. Yet for this very reason there is never-ending talk of ideas, novelty, and surprise. . . . Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving." To keep moving—just like the shark, which devours whatever comes its way. (Indeed Carl Gottlieb's paperback quickie *The Jaws Log* com-

Steven Spielberg, *Jaws*, 1975, still from a color film in 35 mm., 124 minutes. Photo: Photofest.

pares producers David Brown and Richard Zanuck to sharks—*nice* sharks, not so much predatory as hyperalert: “Just as the Great White Shark can sense the erratic vibrations of a swimmer in the water, so can Richard and David sense the movement of a literary property in the publishing world.”)

The shark is nature’s revenge—but revenge for what exactly? Although designed to dispel the idea that the shark is “the cold, mechanical eating-machine of popular myth,” the exhibit “Sharks! Fact and Fantasy,” at New York’s American Museum of Natural History this winter, nevertheless greets visitors (courtesy of Red Lobster) with a facsimile set of jaws that suggest a creature as big as a Greyhound. What is this fish’s role in the nation’s fantasy life?

Traveling through the U.S. during the summer of ’75, Umberto Eco, noting the local mores, saw the shark in *Jaws* as “a hyperrealistic model in plastic, ‘real’ and controllable like the audioanimatronic robots of Disneyland.” Two sequels, several re-releases, innumerable clones, and 19 years later, a *Jaws* theme-park ride did in fact open, at Universal Studios Florida—a six-minute boat trip in which a 32-foot latex-and-polyurethane shark, moving with the thrust of a 727 jet engine, surfaces around once a minute to spook and spray. *Jaws* the film is itself predicated on a ruthless notion of movie as roller coaster. The buildup is certainly as long as the wait for a Disneyland ride—the monster remains invisible until 80 minutes into the movie. Then, with each appearance bigger than the last, it repeatedly violates human space, erupting from below. As visualized on book jacket and movie poster, the *Jaws* shark is at once monstrous phallus and vagina dentata. Coalescing a whole nexus of submerged feelings and sadistic sexuality, the film opens with one of the most blatantly eroticized murders in the history of cinema—and one that openly encourages the audience to identify with the killer.

In 1975, there were few American fears that were not displaced onto the shark. That summer alone, the *Jaws* poster was parodied to show the Statue of Liberty menaced by the CIA, Portugal by communism, Uncle Sam by a Soviet submarine buildup, Gloria Steinem by male chauvinism (though here the swimmer attacked the shark back), American citizens by a tax “bite,” American wages by inflation, American drivers by the energy crisis, American workers by unemployment, and Gerald Ford by recession, Ronald Reagan, and a toothless Congress. (Meanwhile, Fidel Castro identified the great white with U.S. imperialism.) Historians of drive-ins noted that the creature’s true kin was the Japanese movie-monster Godzilla, who emerged from Tokyo harbor, disturbed from eternal slumber by the atomic bomb. *Jaws* too was haunted by the idea of nuclear holocaust, and by fear of retribution: it makes one character retell the story of the USS *Indianapolis*, the battleship that delivered the atomic bombs meant for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then suffered a suitably cosmic trial—hit by a torpedo, its crew forced to abandon ship in shark-infested seas, and hundreds of seamen dead.

In short, *Jaws* was perceived, correctly, as a political film. Representing a crisis in American leadership, it was in production both as the Watergate disaster played itself out and as the nation marked the fifth anniversary of Senator Edward Kennedy’s car accident on the island of Chappaquiddick, off Martha’s Vineyard, with the resultant death of a young campaign worker. Chappaquiddick was consistently in the news during the *Jaws* shoot—in fact Bruce was filmed gliding through the same channel where Kennedy had ditched the car. That year *The New York Times Magazine* ran a lengthy article on the still-unexplained circumstances of Mary Jo Kopechne’s death, and the subject was rehashed by *Time*, the *Boston Globe*, and *60 Minutes*.

By the time *Jaws* wrapped, Nixon was gone, and Kennedy had removed



himself from the presidential race—both of them victims of what now, post-*Jaws*, would be called a “media feeding frenzy.” (Fittingly, the first recorded use of the phrase was by former Nixon press secretary Gerald L. Warren.) Nor were Nixon and Kennedy all that America had tossed into the drink—by the summer of *Jaws* there was no more Vietnam war, no further talk of the space race, no new Miami or Las Vegas to construct. As the summit of American accomplishment, there was now only this. . . .

“It looked like a Nike missile, but it was one of the sharks,” the *Boston Phoenix* had reported from the set, having penetrated Spielberg’s security system to note Bruce’s “inner workings of pumps, gauges, hoses, and clamps.” *Jaws* “should never have been made,” Spielberg would maintain, describing his “impossible effort” in *The Jaws Log*: “Launching *Jaws* was a film production problem analogous to NASA trying to land men on the moon and bring them back.” Yes, no less remarkable than Universal Studio Florida’s \$45 million attraction is its promotion mobile, the Landshark—an “incredible state-of-the-art radio broadcast facility on wheels,” constructed from the same “space-age polypropylene honeycomb utilized in NASA’s space shuttle vehicles” and created to whip the populace into a frenzy of *Jaws* consciousness.

In *The Jaws Log*, Gottlieb recalls a cocktail party at which *New York Times* political columnist and Vineyard regular James Reston buttonholed producer Zanuck and berated him for Hollywood’s apparent lack of interest in celebrating the impending Bicentennial. What Reston couldn’t know was that in giving America a new source of pride, *Jaws* would be that celebration. □

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Rendering of marine mammals and sharks that lived in the Pacific Ocean millions of years ago. From “Sharks! Fact and Fantasy,” exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, 1994.