

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE WATER:  
*JAWS AND THE ENVIRONMENT*

By

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis presents an analysis of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* and the film's depiction of nature. This analysis will show that the film derives horror from the depiction of nature encroaching on human spaces. Through the film's depictions of shark attacks, it forces viewers to confront their own edibility. The filmmaking techniques place humans on the other side of the eater/eaten binary, and present humans a prey. Similarly, the depictions of environments show the presence of nature as a disruption to the film's established visual style. This thesis asserts film analysis as a necessary tool in understanding the nature/culture binary and how film narratives can contribute to this division.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **Introducing the Topic**

On June 20, 1975, Universal released *Jaws* into hundreds of American movie theaters. The film follows the aftermath of a series of shark attacks in a small New England beach town. Fearing what will happen if the shark is allowed to roam local water unchecked, Brody (Roy Scheider) the town's police chief, Hooper (Richard Dreyfus) a visiting marine biologist, and Quint (Robert Shaw) a local shark hunter, team up to hunt and kill the fish. The film was an immediate commercial success, making back the film's \$7 million budget in its opening weekend. By the end of *Jaws'* initial theatrical run, it had earned over \$260 million domestically, making it the highest grossing film to date.<sup>1</sup> The film was a massive critical success, earning an Academy Award nomination for best picture, in addition to wins for sound, editing, and musical score. Critics raved calling the film, "a stunningly effective thriller," "a film that's as frightening as *The Exorcist*," and "the most perfectly constructed horror story in our time."<sup>2</sup> This success spawned several

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<sup>1</sup> "Jaws," Box Office Mojo, accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0073195/>.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Ebert, "Jaws Movie Review & Film Summary (1975)," [rogerebert.com](http://rogerebert.com), accessed October 24, 2022, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/jaws-1975>.; Kathleen Carroll, "Jaws' Sends Shivers of Terror Down the Spine: 1975 Review," *New York Daily News*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/jaws-sends-shivers-terror-spine-1975-review-article-1.2229798>.; Arthur Knight, "Jaws': Thr's 1975 Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 20, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/jaws-review-original-1975-movie-799461/>.



*Jaws* sequels and gave birth to the shark-attack movie as a film genre. Aquatic terrors like *Piranha* (1978, Dante) and *Orca* (1977, Anderson), inspirational dramas like *Soul Surfer* (2011, McNamara), made-for-television pulp like *Sharknado* (2011, Ferrante) owe their success to the foundation set by *Jaws*. Still, to this date, no shark-attack film has matched the commercial and critical success of *Jaws*.

Importantly, the impact of *Jaws* extends beyond narrative filmmaking and into documentary as well. Looking at Discovery Channel's *Shark Week* programming, Iri Cermak analyzes the presence of *Jaws* imagery in the documentary *Great White Serial Killer* and their impact on the audience's perception of sharks. While most audiences understand documentaries are made to entertain as well as inform, *Great White Serial Killer* creates "fictions that amplify the entertainment factor and skimp on science."<sup>3</sup> By looking at the documentary's plot structure, use of sound, and visual framing, Cermak found that *Great White Serial Killer* visually references *Jaws* while perpetuating much of the same pseudoscience about sharks' intentionality. Cermak argues the documentary's "*Jaws* imagery is counterproductive to the text's scientific angle not only because it rehashes clichés that weaken science in the public eye as an evaluative, measured system of inquiry, but because it fundamentally devalorizes shark individuals and species in their totality."<sup>4</sup> By making visual and narrative references to *Jaws*—a movie audiences understand as the exemplar shark film—*Great White Serial Killer* reinforces false narratives about shark-human interactions popularized by *Jaws*.

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<sup>3</sup> Iri Cermak, "Jumping the Shark: White Shark Representations in *Great White Serial Killer* Lives—The Fear and the (Pseudo-)Science," *Journalism and Media* 2, no. 4 (December 2021): 599.

<sup>4</sup> Cermak, 598.

While *Jaws*' impact on the perception of sharks by humans is well documented, there is little scholarship assessing how this relationship is depicted visually in the film. Existing scholarship on the film has addressed a wide range of topics in relation to *Jaws* including genre studies, music studies, adaptation studies, and film history; additionally, which some scholarship addresses *Jaws*' impact on human-shark interactions, it rarely addresses how these are affected by film form. While understanding the impact of the film's narrative is important, its overemphasis in scholarship has been to the detriment of studying how the film's stylistic choices frame human-shark relationships. Looking at the film through this lens reveals the intertwined relationship between human-animals and the environment. Humans operate as the conqueror and subject, while also shown as a potential victim and object. Though the film objectifies human bodies and complicates the relationship between humans and the ocean, it ultimately shows that human subjectivity and the dominance of nature is prioritized in the film.

In addition to the film's impact on how sharks are visually represented in film and television, *Jaws* is also a seminal point for media responses to human-shark encounters. In the aftermath of the film's release, the headlines of shark attack coverage were filled with phrases like "rogue shark," "man-eater," and "perfect killing machine."<sup>5</sup> This language mirrors that of the film, and depicts sharks as not only dangerous, but intentional when they bite humans. Beryl Francis notes this "*Jaws* format" of reporting persists today, writing, "Reference to the movie and use of highly descriptive language, such as 'man-eater,' 'monster of the deep,' 'predator,' especially in the print media, has

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<sup>5</sup> Beryl Francis, "Before and After 'Jaws'": Changing Representations of Shark Attacks," *The Great Circle* 34, no. 2 (2012): 44–64.

continued to describe shark incidents regardless of the severity of the encounter.”<sup>6</sup> *Jaws*’ impact on how shark-human encounters are covered by the press is clear even decades after the film’s release.

The goal of this project is to address this literature gap through a close reading of *Jaws*. This analysis will examine the film through an ecocritical lens in order to dissect the film’s construction of human-shark encounters and the environment. The film presents human-shark relationships as antagonistic; in the narrative of the film, sharks are a pest who have to be killed for the sake of human comfort. In tandem with the narrative, the visual language of the film creates a nature/culture binary in which human-animals are excluded from and more important than the more-than-human world. However, some of the film’s stylistic choices point to the weakness of this binary by forcing audiences to recognize their own edibility and fragile subjectivity. The film captures human-animals as both a master conqueror and as vulnerable prey. This thesis will attempt to address the following questions:

- How do the iconographic, textual, and formal properties of *Jaws* represent the nature/culture binary? Is this binary secured or troubled?
- How are human-animals rhetoricized in *Jaws*? How does this rhetorical component impact the film’s treatment of the nature/culture binary?
- What are the ecological dimensions of the film’s engagement with the nature/culture binary? What are the broader social implications of this reading?

These questions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters to demonstrate how the narrative of *Jaws* upholds a western, antagonistic worldview of nature. However,

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<sup>6</sup> Francis, 56.

even when upholding this view, there are glimpses of its arbitrariness. Through a close textual analysis, the following chapters of this thesis will assess the representation of shark-human encounters and the environment in *Jaws*. This analysis will reveal the entanglement of human-animals and nature. Though humans are shown to dominate and control nature in the film, it also places them in and as part of nature. The film's horror is derived from the encroachment of nature; it is nature's intrusion into human culture which makes the shark a monster. The tension between nature and culture forces calls attention to the complicated positions of human animals in defining and controlling nature.

This critical analysis begins with the second chapter which will analyze the film's depiction of the eater/eaten binary in *Jaws*. It will argue the film blurs the lines of the eater/eaten binary by positioning human beings as potential prey. The fear felt by the viewers is a result of the film's depictions and discussion of human-shark encounters. Audiences are forced to reconcile with the fact that they are a vulnerable part of the food web who can be eaten by predators. When characters are eaten on screen, it forces the audience to recognize a potential to be "meat" for a hungry predator. It will also position *Jaws* within a "politics of edibility" which recognizes the artificiality of a binary eater/eaten and "also respects the relations generated" in response to this recognition.<sup>7</sup> When presented with a new relationship with nature, the film's narrative does not respect the shifted dynamics and disruptions of the eater/eaten binary. Characters reference their own edibility and the camera objectifies their bodies, but the film's conclusion reinforces human superiority. Characters do not accept their new reality, instead they challenge it by

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<sup>7</sup> Joshua Trey Barnett, "Politics of Edibility: Reconceptualizing Ecological Relationality," *Environmental Communication* 12, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 219.

destroying the shark who disrupted it. The narrative and film form build an image of sharks as inorganic killing machines who actively hunt human prey.

The third chapter will step away from the shark to look at the film's representation of a nature/culture binary. The film has three major locations: the town Amity Beach, the ocean, and the beach. The town represents the interests of human animals, and exists on the culture side of this binary. In contrast, the ocean is the shark's territory, standing in for the nature side of this binary. The beach—a space which could exist between these poles—is claimed by the townspeople as a space they must control; it is a space they need control for economic safety. When the shark announces its presence in this space—a space where fish naturally exists—the townspeople lash out as the line between nature and culture is challenged. By setting out to sea in order to kill the shark, the human actors of the film not only assert their control of not only the beach, but the ocean itself, perpetuating the human domination of nature.

Through analysis of the film's narrative, this thesis will argue *Jaws* displays the tangled relationships of humans, sharks, and the environment. Though the film ultimately upholds western conceptions of nature as conquerable, antagonistic, and beneath humans, there are moments which cross this divide, positioning humans as part of the environment.

## **Literature Review**

Despite being one of the most successful films of all time, little attention has been paid to *Jaws* and the depiction of the environment. This literature review has lays the groundwork for analysis of *Jaws* in an ecological context, analyzing its depiction of human and non-human animals as well as the environments.

Existing scholarship on *Jaws* has examined a range of subjects, but not enough attention has been paid to the film's depiction of nature. Beryl Francis identifies *Jaws*' effect on media reporting on human shark encounters, noting how the film's language seeped into reporting through phrases like "rogue shark" and "monster fish."<sup>8</sup> Christopher Neff expands on this, noting how the film's narrative has been used as a "movie myth" to support policy actions affecting human-shark encounters.<sup>9</sup> Both scholars make connections between the film's narrative and real-world attitudes toward sharks. The film's depiction of sharks as killing-machines has been cemented and perpetuated by media reporting, government policies, and other films.

Other scholars have taken a closer look at the film's narrative and language, rather than its effects on the perception of sharks. Giorgio Biancorosso offers a close reading of the film's music. In analyzing one of the most famous film scores of all time, Biancorosso argues the shark's musical motif is "is the only reliable signifier of the shark" and is the main warning of the fish's danger.<sup>10</sup> Even before there is an attack, the shark has been solidified in the viewer's mind as menacing. What these readings share is an understanding that the image of the shark as constructed in *Jaws* is entirely human-made. Be it in the misrepresentation of shark behavior or its construction through music, the shark presented in *Jaws* bears no resemblance to the actual fish.

David Robinson conducts an ecocritical assessment of Peter Benchly's *Jaws*, the book from which the film is adapted. Robinson argues the attacks in *Jaws* "represent a

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<sup>8</sup> Francis, "Before and After 'Jaws'," 56.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Neff, "The *Jaws* Effect: How Movie Narratives Are Used to Influence Policy Responses to Shark Bites in Western Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 119.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Biancorosso, "The Shark in the Music," *Music Analysis* 29, no. 1.3 (2010): 306.

situation in which humans lack control or authority, because humans are vulnerable in a world where sharks are at home.”<sup>11</sup> Robinson argues Benchly’s work also condemns ignorant human characters who lack the ability to understand the sharks, reading the work as partly critical of human exceptionalism. However, this argument cannot be fully supported, as the novel—like the film—ends with the shark’s demise.

Jane Caputi argues *Jaws* should be understood as a patriarchal myth which asserts male dominance along with the dominance of nature. She writes, “The purpose of *Jaws* and other myths of this genre is to instill dread and loathing for the female and usually culminate in her annihilation.”<sup>12</sup> The film is a modernization of “male vanquishment of the female symbolized as a sea monster, dragon, serpent, vampire, etc.”<sup>13</sup> This makes *Jaws* a film which upholds two dualistic views, one upholding dominance of nature and another upholding misogyny.

The connections between feminist and environmentalist concerns are common. Val Plumwood argues the rational thought which dominates Western culture works to continue sexism and environmental harm. Plumwood argues “racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic differences as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority.”<sup>14</sup> This dualistic thought aligns the feminine with nature, and positions the male not only as

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<sup>11</sup> David Robinson, “Monster or Great Fish? Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* as Ecocritical Text,” *Scrutiny* 21, no. 3 (2016): 68.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Caputi, “Jaws As Patriarchal Myth,” *Journal of Popular Film* 6, no. 5 (1978): 305.

<sup>13</sup> Caputi, 305.

<sup>14</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Digital printing (London: Routledge, 2003), 4.

the master of the female but as the conqueror of nature. Both women and nature are warped into inferior “others” who can be controlled through dominance. Plumwood adds:

To be defined as ‘nature’ in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the ‘environment’ or invisible background conditions against which the ‘foreground’ achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place.<sup>15</sup>

This line of thinking works to justify the subjugation of nature and women. Both are transformed into something to be controlled, used as a means to an end by (western, male-dominated) culture. This rationalized way of thing is deeply ingrained in western culture, and has had clear effects on western thought and art, including film.

The cinema has a long history with images of non-human animals. Many of the earliest recorded moving images were of non-human animals, one of the most famous examples of this being the Thomas Edison actuality “Electrocuting the Elephant” (1903). This single-reel short shows the execution of Topsy, an elephant at Coney Island who had killed three people. In the film, she is paraded in front of the audience—a live audience within the film watches as well. She is then fitted with an electrocution device, tied to a post, and killed. Smoke rises from her body; eventually collapses Topsy, dying as she lies convulsing. Though over 100 years old, “Electrocuting the Elephant” and Topsy are important pieces of film history. As Barbara Creed writes:

It was the first film of a live execution of an animal; it led to a public debate about humane versus cruel attitudes to animals; and it once again reinforced the

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<sup>15</sup> Plumwood, 4.



important role played by animals in the history of the cinema in terms of both technology and subject matter.<sup>16</sup>

Early cinematic depictions of animals set the tone for how animals are typically represented cinematically. Anat Pick describes film as “biopolitical apparatuses that not only control and process nonhuman bodies but constitute animals as bodies, and lives, to-be-dominated.”<sup>17</sup> “Electrocuting the Elephant” exemplifies this notion of the cinema as a means of furthering human chauvinism. With no context or empathy for Topsy’s situation, it presents her violent death as a novel entertainment. Creed notes Topsy’s death carries a host of representational meanings as a “tamed jungle animal, beloved circus performer, dangerous monster, and colonised other.”<sup>18</sup> Together these roles work together to reinforce cinema as a tool of colonization, one which works to reinforce the nature/culture binary and human superiority. The cinematic death of Topsy is a visual representation of western culture’s perceived domination of nature.

Although the shark in *Jaws* is an animatronic, its impact is real. Through its narrative and cinematic language, the film reinforces the same nature/culture dialect as “Electrocuting the Elephant.” Like the shark in *Jaws*, Topsy the elephant deviates from the western conception of nature as passive and tamable. The shark lays claim to the human-controlled beach by hunting humans, and Topsy defied her passivity by mauling her captors. Both of these animals present threats to humanity’s mastery of nature, so human superiority is asserted through the killing of the shark, just as it was through

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara Creed, “Animal Deaths on Screen: Film and Ethics,” *Relations*, no. 2.1 (2014): 18.

<sup>17</sup> Anat Pick, “Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s *Animali Criminali*,” *Screen* 56, no. 1 (2015): 98.

<sup>18</sup> Creed, “Animal Deaths on Screen,” 21.

Topsy's execution. The non-human animals' rights are not considered in both matters and the animal is viewed only as a nuisance to human activity. Through these cinematic acts of violence, film exaggerates the divides between human and non-human animals as well as nature and culture.

Contemporary scholarship in film and communication has explored the environment in its relationship to the apocalypse and sublime. Niklas Salmose troubles the environmental disaster film genre, stating "The structure of the action-adventure narrative, which frames [environmental] spectacles, negates any real impact and instead establishes a nostalgic and conservative anthropocentrism."<sup>19</sup> Salmose argues that films about apocalyptic worlds affected by climate change still center the climate's effects on human and focuses on a salvation of human culture. Caroline Kjærulff finds a more ambiguous relationship between nature and the apocalypse in her analysis of the film *Annihilation*. Kjærulff states in the film "nature is portrayed ambiguously to invite reflection on the topic of environmental degradation and humans' position in nature."<sup>20</sup> She argues that through film horror and depictions of the environment, the film explores ideas new kinds of being the human's place in nature.

This divide between nature and culture is a socially constructed divide. In this binary, nature (the wilderness, non-human animals, etc.) is seen as opposed to and separate from culture (humanity, civilization, etc.). The binary assumes that nature is conquered, dominated, and tamed, and is a distinct, separate entity. Cronon described

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<sup>19</sup> Niklas Salmose, "The Apocalyptic Sublime: Anthropocene Representation and Environmental Agency in Hollywood Action-Adventure Cli-Fi Films," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 6 (2018): 1417.

<sup>20</sup> Caroline Kjærulff, "The Ambiguous Portrayal of Nature in *Annihilation*," *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English*, no. 7 (2021): 128.

nature as a “creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history.”<sup>21</sup> Humanity constructed nature in accordance with cultural values; as values evolve over time, so have perceptions of nature. Cronon stated that for many, “wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth.”<sup>22</sup> This understanding of nature as “pure” or “pristine” is too simple a view. Because nature is a construct of humanity, the two are inseparably tied to one another. Humans are animals and thus part of nature. Similarly, because nature is socially constructed it is part of culture.

The eater/eaten binary is one as arbitrary as the nature/culture binary, as is the construction of what is and is not meat. Because meat and food exist on the culture side of the nature/culture binary, our language seeks to remove the animal from the meat. Schutten (2008) wrote, “The process of transforming an animal into meat necessitates the erasure of the subject, that is, the animal. When humans kill other animals for food, the animal is transformed into meat.”<sup>23</sup> Adams argued, “we continue to interpret animals from the perspective of human needs and interests: we see them as usable and consumable.”<sup>24</sup> This makes animals an object who are used by humans as a means to an end. Adams refers to this erasure of animals from meat as the “absent referent.” These animals disappear through language that renames their dead bodies and positions them for consumption. As Schutten (2008) summarized, “To be meat is to be weak (object); to

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<sup>21</sup>William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7.

<sup>22</sup> Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 7.

<sup>23</sup> Julie Schutten, “Chewing on the Grizzly Man: Getting to the Meat of the Matter,” *Environmental Communication* 2, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 204.

<sup>24</sup> Carol J. Adams, “Ecofeminism and the Eating of Animals,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 136.

eat meat is to be strong (subject). Humans (subject) turn animals into meat (object).”<sup>25</sup>

Humans continue their dominance through the erasure of non-human animals as food through the continuation of the absent referent and consumption of meat.

This mindset positions humans not at the top of the food chain, but instead separates them from it. Plumwood wrote, “Animals can be our food, but we can never be their food. Human exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten.”<sup>26</sup> Humans have exempted themselves from the most natural of processes: becoming food. Barnett (2018) wrote, “that humans not only master but also consume nature is so familiar an idea that other ways of thinking about the relationships between humans and nature are readily dismissed as bizarre and profane mutations of the established and permanent order.”<sup>27</sup> These barriers must be recognized as artificial and the dynamics shifted by this recognition be respected. Joshua Barnett argued, “one of the most notable lessons from the environmental and environmental justice movements has been that human bodies are not only in environments, but also of them.”<sup>28</sup> Though culture has been constructed this way, humanity is not separate from the environment.

Human bodies and their actions play a crucial role in environmental rhetoric. Viewers react strongly to the visual representation of human bodies, making them an effective tool for evoking response. Delicath and DeLuca argued that image events work as argument fragments in the public screen, and place the role of argument construction

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<sup>25</sup> Schutten, “Chewing on the Grizzly Man,” 204.

<sup>26</sup> Val Plumwood, “Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death,” *Environmental Values* 17, no. 3 (2008): 324.

<sup>27</sup> Joshua Trey Barnett, “Politics of Edibility,” *Environmental Communication* 12, no. 2 (February 17, 2018): 218.

<sup>28</sup> Barnett, 221.

on audiences; it is up to audiences to derive specific meaning from an image event.<sup>29</sup> DeLuca also noted image events often, “revolve around images of bodies—vulnerable bodies, dangerous bodies, taboo bodies, ludicrous bodies, transfigured bodies.”<sup>30</sup> DeLuca is concerned with documented real-world protesters, but the image event has implications with cinematic, nonfiction images as well. Whether the event is real, recreated, or imagined, when events are seen the impact they have on a viewer is real. As argued by DeLuca and Peeples, images are what dominate modern public discourse.<sup>31</sup> As one of the most prominent films of all time, *Jaws* played a key role in shaping public views of sharks and shark attacks. The visceral feelings evoked from the film’s attack sequences persist in public consciousness forty years later.

The next chapter will look at *Jaws*’ objectification of human bodies as meat. Through the shark’s gaze, human bodies are looked at as vulnerable prey, ready to be eaten. Despite their characterization as potential food, human characters react to the shark’s killings with emotion which is not typical of meat. Thus, human bodies exist dualistically as both character and food—subject and object—presenting the tangled relationship between human-animals and the natural environment. The film is frightening not only because it shows human bodies as objects but because it shows them as subjects as well. Bodies are objectified, but retain the pain and emotion that comes with subjectivity.

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<sup>29</sup> Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the ‘Violence’ of Seattle,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (June 2002): 125.

<sup>30</sup> Kevin DeLuca, “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36, no. 1 (June 1999): 10.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen,” 151.

## CHAPTER II: SEEING PEOPLE AS MEAT

### Introduction to Chapter II

*Jaws* creates a dialectical relationship between subject and object for its human characters. Structured around a series of fatal shark attacks, the film is rife with imagery of human-animals as prey. The viewer sees the victims of these attacks as both a complete subject and an objective prey for the predator. According to Val Plumwood, western dualistic conceptions of nature present humans as a subject above and outside nature, and this divide is “mobilised for this purpose of inferiorising the sphere of nature.”<sup>32</sup> Plumwood adds, “the culture, the values and the areas of life associated with the dualised other are systematically and pervasively constructed and depicted as inferior.”<sup>33</sup> Western conceptions of nature and culture, other the dualized nature, pushing human culture as the superior force. Through its depiction of human shark encounters, *Jaws* blurs this divide, showing humans potential to be brought into nature. The victims of the shark’s attacks are not entirely subject or object, but are instead defined by their entangled treatment in between this divide.

With particular attention given to the film’s attack sequences and the autopsy of the first victim, this chapter will analyze how *Jaws* complicates relationships between subject/object and eater/eaten. The film presents human bodies as neither entirely

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<sup>32</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Plumwood, 47.

objective nor subjective. The shark's attacks place human-animals within the food chain, troubling the distance between predator and prey. Still, the film does not grant this dialectical subject-/objectivity to the shark, presenting it as a mindless killing machine.

This chapter begins with an analysis of *Jaws*' use of "killer POV." As described by Adam Hart, killer POV differs from point-of-view shots by not showing the audience who is looking. The technique shoots from the perspective of an off screen character, but does not show the character who is looking. The sequences using this technique complicate the representation of human-animals by showing them as both victims of an attack and food for a hungry shark. By showing humans as food, these sequences place human-animals within the food chain and as part of nature.

Then, it will transition to an analysis of how the victims are viewed and discussed after they are attacked. This section will argue the representation of victims post-attack further complicates the divide between subject and object. During the attacks, the victims are shown as subjects. However, after the attacks, their bodies are only shown in parts and pieces, objectifying them. Drawing on Carol Adams' "absent referent," it will argue presenting bodies in chunks rather than as whole allows viewers to forget the personality once attached to the corpse. Additionally, it will find that the character's discussion of victims and potential victims characterize them as food.

Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of how the film denies the shark subjectivity. It will use Barbara Creed's "creaturely gaze" to analyze how the film prevents the audience from identifying with the fish. The violence and swiftness of its death coupled with the plastic quality of the special effects distance the audience from the fish and prevent sympathy from forming.

## **Killer POV**

In the opening moments of *Jaws*, viewers are situated in the shark's perspective. The film opens with an underwater long take. The credits fade in and out as the camera mechanically glides across the ocean floor. This is set to a score that is highlighted by sharp, abrasive string instruments. The underwater photography and ominous music tell the audience they are seeing from the shark's perspective and set an uneasy tone. The film then cuts to the land where a young man and woman—named Chrissie—prepare to go swimming late at night. Chrissie makes it to the water; the man struggles to undress and remains on the beach. The film then cuts back under the water, but this time the audience sees the young woman swimming above. The camera gazes at the woman swimming and the score returns, telling the audience that the camera's gaze returned to the shark. As the shark approaches the swimming woman, the music crescendos, cuing the audience to the impending attack. However, before they can see the bloody, underwater attack, the camera returns to the water's surface. Immediately, she is pulled underwater and the audience is forced to watch as she flails and struggles—and ultimately fails—to escape the shark's grip.

Though this opening sequence lasts several minutes, the audience is never shown the shark's body. They see from the shark's perspective, but never the actual fish. Adam Hart (2018) labeled this technique “killer POV” and defined the technique as “a shot that represents the position and perspective of a character but is distinguished from other POV shots in its refusal of reverse shots and its nearly universal characterization as



menacing.”<sup>34</sup> Essential to killer POV is its refusal to allow the audience to see who is looking, building suspense. In *Jaws*, the audience sees the victim from a vulnerable position: below. The victim remains unaware of the rising threat, while the audience is forced to watch from the shark’s POV as it approaches to bite. Though traditional studies of killer POV read as, “inviting—again, even demanding—identification with the killer,” Hart argued killer POV is defined by its rejection of identification writing “the reactions of the looker help to form the sympathetic perspectives of the film itself.”<sup>35</sup> Edward Branigan argued the cinematic POV shot is composed of five elements. In a traditional POV sequence, shot A is composed of a point—which establishes a point in the space—and a glance—which establishes the presence of an off-screen object which looks. The third element is a transition edit used to link shots A and B. Finally, shot B is composed from a point—in which the camera sees from the point captured in shot A—and an object—which reveals the looker implied by the glance.<sup>36</sup> POV shots are not frequently used within classical narratives because of their disruptive potential and attention they call to the film. In identifying this model, Branigan notes “It is possible to vary or destabilise the POV structure in a multitude of ways,” including denying the audience a look at the object, or looker, as in killer POV.<sup>37</sup> Unlike traditional POV sequences, killer POV denies the audience the privilege of seeing who is looking, erecting an identification barrier between the audience and the looker in the sequence. Even when the audience

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<sup>34</sup> Adam Hart, “Killer Pov: First-Person Camera and Sympathetic Identification in Modern Horror,” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 9, no. 1 (November 10, 2018): 71.

<sup>35</sup> Hart, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Branigan, “Formal Permutations of the Point-of-View Shot,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 55-58.

<sup>37</sup> Branigan, 64.

knows who is looking—as they do in *Jaws*—they are unable to identify with the looker when the camera’s gaze remains solely in the looker’s perspective. The use of killer POV coupled with the tense musical score give the sequence an acute sense of danger, in which the victim is unaware of the danger swimming toward her.

The power of killer POV lies in its gaze. The technique objectifies whatever the camera’s gaze is set on. Hart noted, “The objects of killer POV’s look are indeed objectified, but that objectification can itself be horrific.”<sup>38</sup> While the viewer is denied identification with the wielder of the killer POV, the POV shots of *Jaws* do objectify the shark’s victims in the moments before they are attacked. The audience sees these victims as food through the shark’s eyes.

Throughout the film the audience is shown very little of the shark attack itself, but its presence is always clear. Before an attack can be seen from the shark’s perspective, the film cuts back to the surface. In the first attack, the audience is returned to the human perspective and forced to watch as the swimmer tries to escape the shark’s jaws, thrashing and swimming away as best she can. The actor’s performance makes the sympathies of the scene clear. She cries for help and grimaces in pain as the shark drags her across the water’s surface. The audience identifies with her fear, and shudders at their potential to be placed in a similar situation.

As a theoretical concept in film, the gaze is often discussed as not just a look, but as a means of conveying ideology. Laura Mulvey famously argued classical Hollywood cinema was unconsciously structured around a controlling, male gaze which objectifies female bodies and privileges male perspective. Mulvey concluded, “Going far beyond

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<sup>38</sup> Hart, “Killer Pov,” 77.

highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.”<sup>39</sup> In cinema, the gaze is not merely a look, but a look with power. Psychoanalytic film scholarship focuses on the dissection and understanding of this gaze, and how it controls viewers. Todd McGowan writes, “the task of the film theorist becomes combating the illusory mastery of the gaze with the elucidation of the underlying symbolic network that this gaze elides.”<sup>40</sup> However, McGowan complicates this view of the gaze as a channel for dominant ideology, arguing the gaze actually “marks a disturbance in the functioning ideology rather than its expression.”<sup>41</sup>

The gaze of the shark in *Jaws* is layered but limited. Because of the film’s use of killer POV, the wielder of the gaze remains off screen; still, viewers are aware they are looking from a subjective point-of-view. McGowan argues:

The gaze is a blank point—a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience—within the aesthetic structure of the film, and is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film. [...] As the indication of the spectator’s dissolution, the gaze cannot offer the spectator anything resembling mastery.<sup>42</sup>

This is true of the use of killer POV in *Jaws*; the gaze offers information, but no sense of control or mastery. In fact, the gaze of the shark disempowers the audience by withholding information. When seeing from the shark’s perspective, viewers are aware of the impending attack, but helpless as it unfolds. Because the shark remains off screen, the

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<sup>39</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 11.

<sup>40</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan*. State University of New York Press, 2007, 4.

<sup>41</sup> McGowan, 5.

<sup>42</sup> McGowan, *The Real Gaze*, 7.

viewer is unable to attach this gaze to the fish. Keeping the threat off-screen makes the shark even more fearsome, as the viewer can only imagine how powerful the threat actually is. By keeping the shark off-screen, it remains in control of the gaze. The audience desires for the look to be reflected back, to see the shark. However, in this killer POV, it is the shark who controls what is seen.

Most of *Jaws*' attack sequences follow this structure. The camera begins beneath the water following the shark's perspective, and then cuts above to watch humans react to the attack. The structure of these attacks plays on the duality of the eater/eaten binary, presenting humans as both subject and object. These sequences begin with the human as the object of a predator's hunger; they are seen as food. In the lead up to the attack, they are the object. Then, when the camera returns above the water, they become the subject; they are shown as victims of an attack. When an attack occurs, they are the subject and the audience identifies with their emotions. The moments leading up to the attack cause Chrissie to undergo a transformation from subject to object, from human to meat. As Schutten summarizes: "To be meat is to be weak (object); to eat meat is to be strong (subject)."<sup>43</sup> In this sequence, it is the shark who is strong, overpowering the weaker Chrissie to turn her into meat.

However, the dynamics of this sequence are not so simple. Chrissie is not just a piece of meat, nor is she only a subject. The viewers' perspective see-saws, viewing her as an object in one shot and a subject in the next. This back-and-forth which makes Chrissie both the subject of the scene as well as the object of the shark's gaze forces

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<sup>43</sup> Schutten, "Chewing on the Grizzly Man," 204.

viewers to confront their own materiality, to recognize their own potential to be both subject and object. Vivian Sobchack writes:

Indeed, it is in being constituted and treated *as an object*, whether by nonintentional worldly phenomena or by an intentional body-subject, that the body-subject “suffers” a *diminution of subjectivity* and, in this diminution, comes to experience—within subjectivity— an increased awareness of *what it is to be a material object*.<sup>44</sup>

This sequence forces viewers to witness Chrissie’s diminution of subjectivity and confront their own fragile subjectivity. Her body is instantly transformed from subject to object, then back to subject. Viewers see Chrissie as what Sobchack terms an “subjective object,” or “a material being that is nonetheless capable of feeling what it is to be treated only as an object.”<sup>45</sup> Chrissie is not solely a girl going for a swim or a snack for a hungry shark; she is both.

If Chrissie’s subjectivity is transmutable, then the subjectivity of the viewer is as well. If Chrissie’s depiction as a subjective object—a character who is seen but then treated as an object—calls viewers to question their own subjectivity. In *Jaws*, this questioning has horrific effects as it forces viewers to confront their own edibility. If Chrissie can be food, so too can the viewer. The attacks complicate the relationships between human beings and the food chain. It at once places us in the food chain while acknowledging the anguish felt by the victims who are killed.

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<sup>44</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. University of California Press, 2004: 288.

<sup>45</sup> Sobchack, 288.

## Use of Language

The representation of the shark attack victims is as complex as the attacks. The shark's second victim is a young boy named Billy, killed soon after the first victim's remains are discovered. The shark's attack and boy's death send the community into an emotional frenzy. Days after the incident, Billy's mother confronts the police chief about the attack. She is dressed entirely in black with a veil covering her face. Sobbing, she slaps the chief and accosts him for not taking measures to prevent the attack that killed her son. The reaction to her son's death at the jaws of a shark is—expectedly—emotional. The reaction to the discovery of the first victim's remains is similarly emotional. The deputy who finds her remains on the beach collapses to the ground, pounding his fist in the sand, unable to look at her mangled body. These reactions are characterized by their emotion; they acknowledge the victims first and foremost as victims, subjects who had interiority and lives outside of the attacks. Narratively, the victims are discussed as the subjects of their attacks.

Visually, the victims are rarely shown after their attacks. Though all of the shark's victims die, Billy is the only one who is consumed entirely. When Chrissie's remains are found, the audience only sees the pale fingers of her hand wrapped in a mess of seaweed and hair. Later when Hooper, a scientist sent to the island to help with the shark problem, performs an autopsy on the first victim's remains, the body remains mostly concealed by a sheet. Hooper describes the remains in very mannered and scientized terms. He records himself saying, "The torso has been severed in mid-thorax. There are no major organs remaining [...] The right arm has been severed above the elbow with massive tissue loss

in the upper musculature.”<sup>46</sup> The only part of the body that is seen during the autopsy is the same arm that was shown when her body was discovered on the beach. Only now, the audience sees the bone and musculature hanging off where the limb was severed. The skin has faded to an inhumanly pale white. Contrasted against the bright pink of the exposed tissue, the arm is almost unrecognizable as a human body part.

Presenting bodies this way forces viewers to see them in a manner similar to the shark’s gaze. With Chrissie’s autopsy, the audience sees a transformation from life to death. The woman from the opening who sprinted across the beach for a late nice dip in the ocean is gone; this is a corpse. It is a transformation from subject (alive) to object (dead) that is complicated. It is impossible to see Chrissie’s body as fully subjective or objective, as the memory of her life is present in viewers’ minds. This idea is clear in Sobchack’s conception of interobjectivity. Sobchack writes, “we can never completely conceive of being a mere body-object that cannot feel. In sum, like intersubjectivity, interobjectivity is perceived asymmetrically—for we are forever subjects even as we are always also objects.”<sup>47</sup> Even after Chrissie has died, the viewer’s memory is stained by her subjectivity. Her subjectivity remains, even in her death, making it difficult to see her as only an object.

After the victims are attacked, they are only shown in parts and pieces. The third victim’s death is signaled by a shot of his severed leg sinking to the ocean floor and a small cloud of blood floating to the surface. The only remains of these victims are these severed limbs, totally separated from their bodies. This separation creates an absent

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<sup>46</sup> *Jaws*, directed by Steven Spielberg, featuring Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfus, and Robert Shaw (Universal, 1985), 0:31:44 to 0:32:10.

<sup>47</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 316.

referent that objectifies the human body. Carol Adams notes, “The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity. The roast on the plate is disembodied from the pig who she or he once was.”<sup>48</sup> Absent referent allows people to forget that the flesh they consume belonged to a living, breathing organism. The dismembered human limbs shown in *Jaws* are a reversal of this. The absent referent typically displays how humans separate the non-human animal from the food they become. Here, the film separates the human meat from the person it once was. By separating the arm from the body, it makes viewers see it as an object. Without a face or body to put it to, the dismembered limbs lose much of their humanity; they are seen as meat the same as a pig becomes pork or a cow becomes beef. Having seen the bodies these limbs were attached to before their separation, audiences see the transformation from human to meat, from subject to object. This reversal of the absent referent forces audiences to reconcile with their potential meatiness; viewers have been forced to see themselves on the other side of the absent referent.

This representation of humans as meat becomes even more complicated when analyzing how characters discuss potential victims. When Brody and Hooper confront the mayor to implore him to close the beaches, the language used to describe the beachgoers is notably callous. Hooper tells the mayor, “He [the shark] will continue to feed here as long as there is food in the water.”<sup>49</sup> He goes on to say, “There are two ways to deal with this problem. You are either going to kill this animal or cut off its food supply.”<sup>50</sup> Hooper implies here the beachgoers are what is keeping the shark at the beach because they are

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<sup>48</sup> Adams, “Ecofeminism and the Eating of Animals,” 136.

<sup>49</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 0:50:35.

<sup>50</sup> *Jaws*, 0:50:02.



the animal's main source of food. Brody hammers this in further saying, "If you open the beaches on the Fourth of July it's like ringing a dinner bell."<sup>51</sup> This language draws a literal connection between humans and food, and the characters acknowledge the likelihood that more people will be eaten. This conversation not only situates the beachgoers as potential prey, but it describes them as vulnerable and helpless. The shark is the predator, and the only way for humans to avoid consumption is to stay out of the water all together.

This discussion of the potential victims is also notably different from how the shark's actual victims are treated. Outside of Hooper's autopsy, those who were actually killed by the shark are treated with an emotional weight that the potential victims are not. While the grieving mother of the second victim mourns her son's death, the potential victims still on the beach are described as if they are just shark food.

The shark's attacks on Amity Island present a new reality for the town's inhabitants. They are no longer the top predator in the ecosystem. The appearance of the shark and the subsequent attacks place human beings back into the food chain, a dynamic that is new to the residents. The first humans to acknowledge this changing dynamic attempt to adjust their lifestyles to accommodate it. Upon discovering the first victim's remains, Chief Brody attempts to close the beach from the public. Closing the beaches is tantamount to acknowledging the ocean as the shark's territory. However, Brody's attempt to adapt to the new relationship is undermined by the town's political and economic needs. At a town hall meeting after the second victim is killed, the Mayor announces a 24 hour closure of the beaches. This prompts the attendants to boo and jeer,

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<sup>51</sup> *Jaws*, 0:50:58.

with one person shouting, “Twenty-four hours is like three weeks here!”<sup>52</sup> The community is dependent on summer tourism for revenue and need the beaches to keep their businesses afloat. The attempts to adjust to the new relationships sparked by the shark’s arrival is presented as unreasonable and unacceptable. Though some human characters are willing to understand the beach as the shark’s territory, most see the beach not only as a right but as a necessity. They refuse to acknowledge that this new relationship places humans into the food chain as prey for the shark.

### **Objectifying the Shark**

After the shark has attacked a considerable number of people, Brody, Hooper, and Quint set out to hunt, capture, and kill the shark. The shark proves to be a powerful force of nature. It entirely destroys the team’s boat, killing Quint in the process. During the attack, a scuba tank is lodged into the shark’s jaws. As it charges the survivors, Brody attempts to shoot the tank. After finally hitting the tank, it bursts, killing the shark in a massive explosion. The explosion is a bright red geyser erupting from the water’s surface. Chunks of the shark's flesh fall from the sky and float at the surface. The camera cuts underwater to show what remains intact of the fish’s body as it sinks toward the bottom of the sea in a bloody cloud. As the blood pours from the carcass, it fills the screen with dark red. Despite being structured around a series of shark attacks, the death of the shark itself is among the most graphic and violent images in the film. While the attacks on humans are extremely violent, most are not graphic. The audience sees bits and pieces, but never the entire attack. By contrast, the shark's death is bloody and visceral.

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<sup>52</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 0:2028.

According to Barnett (2018), “A politics of edibility entails recognizing the artificiality of the body/environment and eater/eaten boundaries as well as respecting the relationships that are generated in the wake of their deconstruction.”<sup>53</sup> While the film begins by acknowledging a new relationship between the citizens of Amity Island and the shark, it treats attempts to adapt to this as unreasonable. The people of the town are unwilling to change their lives to adjust the shark’s presence. In doing this, the film ultimately reinforces the eater/eaten and nature/culture binaries and falls out of line with a politics of edibility. While there is recognition of the new relationship, there is not an acceptance or respect. Initially, characters outright ignore the new dynamic by refusing to believe it happened. The mayor convinces Brody to change the cause of death for the first victim to “boating accident.” Eventually, when confronted with the fact that this relationship is set to stay, the principal characters set out to kill the shark and end the relationship. Killing the shark is the ultimate dismissal of its claim to the beach, made worse by the fact that fish is ultimately killed miles away from shore. When the shark is killed, the relationship dies with it, and the community may return to business as usual. The shark meets the same fate as its victims, a transformation from animal to meat.

The shark’s death with all of its violence and force creates a wide divide between human animals and nature. In killing the fish, the film perpetuates the divide between the two and human’s ability to dominate and control nature as a means to an end. Barbara Creed argues the cinematic deaths of animals create a space “between spectator and the image of actual animal death on screen is an ethical space that gives rise to a ‘creaturely’ gaze with the potential to break down boundaries, to affirm communicability, between

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<sup>53</sup> Barnett, “Politics of Edibility,” 218.

human and non-human animals.”<sup>54</sup> Creed’s argument focuses primarily on documentaries and actualities which show the filmed deaths of real, non-human animals. This “creaturely gaze” has multiple challenges to overcome in *Jaws*; the film is firmly in the action and horror genres and uses animatronic special effects for the shark. Creed’s creaturely gaze “does not erect a barrier between the spectator and the object of the look. It is evoked particularly in response to images of dead and dying beings and in knowledge of the shared finitude of all beings.”<sup>55</sup> *Jaws* denies this potential for a creaturely gaze and does build walls between the viewer and the shark, preventing any kind of a sympathetic identification with the fish.

The shark’s quick, violent, and bloody death also prevents the audience from forming sympathies for the fish. When compared to the deaths of human characters in the film, the shark’s demise is emotionless and instant. When Chrissie is attacked and killed in the film’s opening scene, the audience watches for nearly a minute—uninterrupted—as Chrissie struggles against the shark. She cries in pain as she is attacked and killed and the audience connects with her as a subject. When the second victim—Billy—is killed and eaten, his death is less drawn out than Chrissie’s. However, the viewer still connects to this death through Billy’s mother, who mourns her son’s death. In contrast, the shark’s death is instantaneous and marks the film’s conclusion. After Brody shoots the tank which annihilates the shark, he has a singular moment of celebration, loudly cheering after making the shot. After this, Brody and Hooper begin to swim toward the shore and the credits roll. The shark’s death is barely given any emotional response, not even celebration, and the film concludes. While the human characters are shown to be treated

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<sup>54</sup>Creed, “Animal Deaths on Screen,” 17.

<sup>55</sup> Creed, “Animal Death on Screen,” 18.

as both subject and object—object of a shark’s hungry gaze, but still the subject of the attack—the shark is treated as an object. The fish’s death is not given the same emotional response as the human characters. When the shark attacks, it remains mostly unseen, attacking from beneath the water’s surface.

This divide between the human and non-human is nurtured in multiple ways, firstly through the prop shark itself. The animatronic shark does not make a major appearance in the film until over an hour into the runtime. The machine is not an extremely realistic recreation of a Great White; the fish has an artificial, plastic quality to its skin and teeth. Its movements in the water are rigid and jerky, differing from the characteristically smooth movements of real sharks. Additionally, characters in the film often characterize the shark by its mechanical qualities. When Quint delivers a monologue about his experience during the sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis he describes a shark’s eyes as “lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll’s eyes” and adds “When he comes at you, doesn’t seem to be living.”<sup>56</sup> When Hooper warns the mayor about how dangerous it will be to keep the beaches open, he describes the shark as “a perfect engine, an eating machine” adding “All this machine does is swim and eat and make little sharks.”<sup>57</sup>

These descriptions—coupled with the fact that the prop used for the shark in the film is a literal machine—closely align with Carolyn Merchant’s description of the mechanistic worldview that emerged after the Scientific Revolution. Merchant argues this view of nature as “dead and inert, manipulable from outside, and exploitable for profits”

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<sup>56</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 1:31:01.

<sup>57</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 0:52:28.

allows for the continued domination and subjugation of nature by humans.<sup>58</sup> This worldview is characterized by ways the scientific method has trained humans to view nature and natural processes as mechanical, controllable, and quantifiable. It positions man as the ultimate authority over nature; nature exists solely for the use of humans and is inferior to human culture. Merchant writes:

Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external rather than internal forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature. Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism.<sup>59</sup>

If nature is not alive and humanity can manipulate and control nature, then the exploitation of the environment and denial of its autonomy can be justified.

## **Conclusion to Chapter II**

The rhetoricization of human-animals in *Jaws* complicates barriers between nature/culture, eater/eaten, and subject/object. Western conceptions of nature which paint it as inferior to human culture are troubled, and with its presentation of shark attacks, the film highlights human-animals' malleable place in this system. Through subjective point-of-view shots from the shark's perspective, the film forces viewers to see humans as prey for the fish, placing them in the food chain and as weaker than nature. However, the film's presentation of these attacks does not simply reverse the role of subject and object.

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<sup>58</sup> Carolyn Merchant. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. Routledge, 2012, 41-42.

<sup>59</sup> Merchant, 48.

Instead, the film troubles the barrier between subjects and objects by depicting these victims as subjective-objects and objective-subjects. This idea is exemplified in the representation of the shark's first victim, Chrissie. In the lead up to the attack, she is seen from the shark's POV. The audience sees Chrissie as the shark does. However, seeing from this perspective does not necessitate identification with the shark. As Murray Smith notes, "the use of POV does not necessarily result in our recognizing a character, being aligned with a character, or being allied with a character."<sup>60</sup> Audiences resist identification with the shark, but do still see as it does. So, while the gaze is objectifying, the objects of the shark's look are not totally objectified. Additionally, once the attack begins, the camera returns to Chrissie's perspective, realigning the audience, and resituating Chrissie as a subject.

The presentation of victims' bodies post-mortem also reckons with this diminished subjectivity. Bodies are presented as pieces (appendages, limbs) rather than as whole, forcing the audience to see them as objects. However, the objects are tainted by the memory of the characters' subjectivity. Because the viewer has seen the bodies before their deaths, they see a transformation from character to object.

Though the film imbues human bodies with a complex relationship between subject and object, the same cannot be said of the shark itself. The shark is treated as an object and described as a "killing machine" who does not think. The fish's death is violent and quick, giving the audience no time to connect with the fish. The fakeness of the prop shark prevents identification as well, as it reminds viewers that the prop is only a mechanical device. The shark is objectified through this, and is never treated as a subject.

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<sup>60</sup> Murray Smith, "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 4 (1994): 41.

This representation is more in line with western conceptions of nature as inert and controllable.

The following chapter will move away from the shark to more closely analyze the film's three main settings: the town, the ocean, and the beach. It will look closely how the construction of the spaces create a divide between nature and culture.



## CHAPTER III: REPRESENTING THE ENVIRONMENT

### **Introduction to Chapter III**

This chapter analyzes the representation of different settings in *Jaws*. Broadly, there are three settings in the film: the town Amity Island, the beach, and the open water. Each of these settings create a different feeling for the audience and characters, affecting viewers' relationship to different environments, specifically the beach and ocean. The main goal of this chapter is to interrogate the varying representations of the film's environments in order to demonstrate the ways *Jaws* reinforces western conceptions of nature. In the film, Amity Island is a setting representing safety. Characters are physically safest on dryland in town, where the shark's threat is only theoretical. The town setting is idealized to exaggerate the sense of danger in more natural environments. By contrast, the ocean is an environment defined by its sense of danger. *Jaws*' depiction of boating and traveling through the ocean heightens interspecies conflict and paints the experience of being in open water as horrific. When characters are on the open water, viewers feel a sense of dread, fearing the unseen danger lurking in the deep. Lastly, the beach; though the beach is a seemingly natural environment and home to many non-human animals, the space has also been colonized and commodified by human culture. Existing between land and water—and between nature and culture—beaches have potential to be a space mediating meaningful interspecies communication; however, in the film these sides collide violently.

While *Jaws*' impact on human-shark relationships in the West is prominent, little scholarship has been dedicated to how the film presents humans' relationship to the actual environment. In a study analyzing long term fears caused by horror movies, Joanne Cantor noted sharks were not the only fear expressed by participants discussing *Jaws*. She notes that almost all participants who expressed fears after viewing *Jaws* not only feared sharks but "were uncomfortable in bodies of water that are completely devoid of sharks."<sup>61</sup> A goal of this chapter is to address this gap by identifying how *Jaws* evokes fear on the water, how this portrayal contrasts other—largely terrestrial—sections of the film, and the implications of these in an environmental context.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the depiction of Amity Island. It will find that the scenes on Amity Island are rooted in a more classical film style than the scenes occurring at sea. Using more long takes and full shots, this first section of the film has a slow pace that does not foreground the danger of the shark. Additionally, the characters minimize the threat of the shark by backgrounding it and insisting it is not worthy of attention.

The next section will look at the film's depiction of the ocean in the second half. David Bordwell observes that while the first half of the film has an average shot duration of 8.8 seconds, the entire film has an average shot duration of 6.5, meaning the second half is cut much faster than the first.<sup>62</sup> Departing from the classical style of the first half, the more frenetic editing style imbues this half with a more dangerous energy.

Additionally, it will argue that the film forces characters and viewers to experience space

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<sup>61</sup> Joanne Cantor, "I'll Never Have a Clown in My House' — Why Movie Horror Lives On," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 292.

<sup>62</sup> David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (March 1, 2002): 26.

differently. By remaining off screen for many of its attacks, the shark remains an unseen presence. The threat of the water becomes not only what can be seen from the boat, but what cannot be seen beneath it.

This section concludes by analyzing the depiction of the beach. Stylistically, the beach is depicted using elements of both Amity and the ocean. Though it is shown with similar techniques seen in Amity at first, the shark's arrival results in a change of visual style that more closely resembles that of the ocean. However, the beach is shown to be a space which has in part been incorporated into the town's economy and human culture. As a part of the beach which cannot be capitalized, the shark represents a threat to this system.

### **Amity Island**

The small town of Amity Island serves as the setting for most of the film's first half. Amity is a typical small, beach town, so wholesome it borders on parody. Kids play in backyards, white fences surround homes, and a billboard featuring a smiling woman boogie boarding greets visitors entering town. Antonia Quirke argues the depiction of Amity is like "taking us on a tour around a Disney set" as the town "showers us with white picket fences, mocking us with the cliché by overwhelming us with it."<sup>63</sup> If the second half of the film is a horror thriller, the first half in Amity is a small-town comedy. The scenes set in Amity Island have a comic tone and classical style which work together to minimize the perceived threat of the shark and establish the safety of the mainland.

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<sup>63</sup> Antonia Quirke, *Jaws*, BFI Modern Classics (BFI Publishing, 2002), 17.

In one of the film's early scenes, Chief Brody files his report the morning after discovering Chrissie's body on the beach with his deputy and the man who was with Chrissie in the lead up to the first attack. The deputy and young man wait in the station as Brody files his report off screen. The young man is framed in a close-up in the foreground, almost looking into the camera. His expressionless face shows him silently processing what he has just seen on the beach. Suddenly, the chief's secretary—Polly—emerges in the doorway, entering with more lighthearted energy. Her arrival does not garner a reaction from the men. The elderly secretary looks at the deputy and loudly declares, "Well, you're up awful early."<sup>64</sup> She walks into the chief's office and the camera follows, dollying in behind her. As Chief Brody attempts to file his report on the shark attack, Polly begins telling him, "We've gotten a lot of calls about the karate school. It seems that the nine-year-olds from the school have been karating the picket fences."<sup>65</sup> The phone rings and Polly answers, telling Brody it is the medical inspector before he hands it over. There is an extreme close up insert shot of the typewriter as Brody clanks out "SHARK ATTACK" as the cause of death in his report. He hangs up the phone and rises to leave. Polly continues to tell Brody about activities in town, but he interrupts, telling her to make a list of any water activities the town has planned. As Brody leaves his office, the camera dollies back, following the same path as when Polly entered. These comedic moments with Polly actively undercut the threat of the shark. Even in this short scene, anytime the viewer is reminded of the shark—be it through the young man's blank stare or Brody's report—Polly undercuts it by calling attention to a more minor issue.

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<sup>64</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 0:8:58.

<sup>65</sup> *Jaws*, 0:09:37

This can be seen again moments later when Brody goes into town to find supplies for making “beach closed” signs. It is a beautiful summer day. Birds chirping and a marching band’s practice can be heard on the soundtrack. Brody enters in a full shot on screen right and walks left toward town; the camera pans with his movements. He is quickly stopped by the owner of the local bike shop carrying a large bike wheel. He tries to show Brody the damage some local children have done to his picket fence, only to be distracted and remark on the chief’s new glasses. The smallness of his problem, along with the unwieldy prop tire, make this moment humorous and distract from the larger problem of the shark. The chief pushes off his request and continues into town. The camera pans further left as Brody enters town. As Brody moves away from the camera and into a long shot, the pan reveals Main Street Amity Island and a sign for Amity’s annual Fourth of July celebration. The street is busy with dozens of people up and down the street going about their day. As the street is revealed, the soundtrack opens up as well. The marching band gets louder, cyclists ring bells, crossing guards blow whistles, and the street hums with the constant murmur of conversations. It’s a chaotic scene with so much going on visually and sonically it practically begs the viewer to forget why they are there in the first place: to make signs to close the beaches.

These comedic scenes distract the viewer from the threat of the shark attack, and background the shark altogether. Val Plumwood identifies backgrounding as a key feature which upholds dualistic views of nature and culture. As Plumwood writes, backgrounding is not only about “making the [dualized] other inessential, denying the importance of the other’s contribution or even his or her reality,” but also asserting those

who are othered “are simply not ‘worth’ noticing.”<sup>66</sup> Even in a film about a collision between nature and culture—between the shark and the people of Amity Island—the film backgrounds and minimizes the shark. As a part of this dual nature, the shark is not worth Brody’s attention. The problems of culture—broken picket fences—are what the townsfolk believe require immediate attention.

This backgrounding of the shark is continued a few minutes later when the town’s mayor stops Brody from alerting others of the shark attack earlier that morning. Brody stands on a drivable dock, waiting to be taken out to a group of Boy Scouts practicing their swimming in the bay. A car pulls onto the dock with him, and five men step out—key among them, the mayor. Brody and the mayor are in the foreground in a medium long shot. The other men are behind them in a long shot. As the mayor pleads with Brody to not close the beach, the dock pulls away from the shore and into the water. The mayor explains to Brody, “We’re really a little anxious that you’re rushing into something serious here,” denying there was even a shark attack in the first place.<sup>67</sup> As the mayor continues, the dock moves across the water. As it moves, houses across the shoreline and boats heading toward the shore occupy the background, reminding viewers that although they are in the water, they are still in civilization.

Brody remains unconvinced. The mayor presses the issue, and pushes Brody closer to the camera, changing the shot first to a medium shot, and then again into a close up. After the shot becomes a close up, the mayor convinces Brody to keep the beaches open. The changing shot distance here takes attention away from the ocean in the background, and puts attention on the actors. As the mayor convinces Brody to not worry

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<sup>66</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 48.

<sup>67</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 0:12:18.

about the shark, the camera pushes the ocean further into the margins of the frame. Like the shark, the ocean backgrounded and not worthy of attention in this scene.

This scene also stands out stylistically. It is one of the longest takes in the film, lasting nearly ninety seconds. Stylistically, the first, largely terrestrial, half of *Jaws* exhibits a more classical film style. However, Thomas Schatz identifies the film as one of the most important entries in the “New Hollywood” movement of the 1970s as it “recalibrated the profit potential of the Hollywood hit, and redefined its status as a marketable commodity and cultural phenomenon as well.”<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Kirsner and Jon Lewis identify the “New Hollywood” period as existing mostly between 1967 and 1976 which saw the arrival of new, younger filmmakers and a changing movie industry. Influenced by European art films and growing youth culture, films of the New Hollywood were faster and more violent than films from prior decades.<sup>69</sup> David Bordwell noted that films coming out of this period exhibited an “intensified” continuity which he characterizes as “traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis.”<sup>70</sup> Intensified continuity represents space along the same patterns of classical continuity. Bordwell notes that with intensified continuity, “Establishing and reestablishing shots situation the actors in the locale. An axis of action governs the actors’ orientations and eyelines, and the shots, however different in angle, are taken from one side of that axis.”<sup>71</sup> Though the rules of classical continuity are followed, intensified continuity amps

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas Schatz. "The New Hollywood." In *Movie Blockbusters*, (Routledge, 2013), 17.

<sup>69</sup> Kirshner, Jonathan, and Jon Lewis, eds. *When the Movies Mattered: The New Hollywood Revisited*. Cornell University Press, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> David Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity,” 16.

<sup>71</sup> Bordwell, 16.

them up, cutting more frequently, favoring close up shots for dialogue, and moving the camera more willingly.

Though *Jaws* was released in the thick of the New Hollywood era, the visual style employed in the first half of the film more closely resembles an old Hollywood style. The long take in which Brody is persuaded to keep beaches open diverts from intensified continuity in a number of ways. First, though it is a dialog scene, there are no cuts; the entire exchange plays out in one take. Second, the scene is an ensemble shot and framed in a medium long shot. Finally, the camera only moves when necessary, pulling back once to accommodate the actors as they move closer. Bordwell notes that with intensified continuity “filmmakers have been inclined to build scenes largely out of singles” meaning that shots are more tightly framed and there are more frequent cuts as dialog is exchanged between characters.<sup>72</sup> However, this scene, like many others in the first half of the film, occurs in a long take, linking the first half of the film to a more conservative, traditional style of filmmaking.

### **Open Water**

The first half of the film works largely to background nature and the shark, and is rooted in a more classical visual style. The second half of the film—occurring mostly on open water—begins when nature forces itself to the foreground and the town can no longer ignore it. After the shark’s third attack, Brody gathers a posse to hunt down the shark. He enlists Quint, a local fisherman with a boat, and Hooper, a shark scientist who has helped investigate the recent attacks. The three set out in Quint’s boat to hunt the

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<sup>72</sup> Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity,” 19.



shark from the ocean. The ocean hunt begins a stylistic and tonal shift in the film. Not only does *Jaws* evolve from a small-town comedy into a tense thriller, but the film style becomes more frenetic.

This change in visual style can be seen in the crew's first encounter with the shark. The moment begins with a low angle close up of Quint. Looking screen left, he watches his fishing rod and waits for movement. The fishing line begins to creak forward, and the film cuts to a shot of the line in the ocean as it moves again. The film cuts back to Quint in the same position, but crosses the axis of action and he now looks screen left. It cuts again to a new angle behind Quint as he puts on a harness to attach to the rod. It then cuts back to the original angle of Quint as he continues preparing his fishing rod. It cuts to a series of extreme close ups as Quint places the rod into a holder, hooks the harness into the rod, and places his feet against the wall for leverage. This short sequence of shots shows Quint from multiple angles and shot distances. This diverges from how action in the first half is staged. Where actions in the first half most often occur in a single long shot and long take, here a simple action is broken up into a series of quick shots. The frequent cuts create a sense of anxiety and heighten tension.

The hurried pacing and faster editing are not the only source of tension in the film's second half. The water itself becomes a source of fear. The water is, undoubtedly, the shark's domain. The murkiness of the ocean prevents the hunters—and the viewer—from accurately following the shark's movements; the fish can appear and disappear in an instant. Knowing this, the crew attempts to create ways to track the fish's movement.

In the first major confrontation between the hunters and the shark, the crew has lured the animal to the boat by chumming the surrounding waters. This fish circles the

boat, its dorsal fin bobbing in and out of the water. After circling the boat, the shark begins to charge directly at it. Quint stands at the bow armed with a harpoon gun; Hooper ties a rope attached to an empty yellow barrel to the end of Quint's harpoon. Just as the shark reaches the boat, Quint fires the gun, lodging the harpoon into the shark's back. As it swims away, the fish pulls the barrel into the water with it. The crew believes the resistance from the barrel will be too much for the shark and prevent it from swimming down. The fish swims away, and the boat pursues, now able to follow its movements. To the crew's dismay, the shark is powerful enough to pull the barrel beneath the water, evading hunters' and remaining hidden. This feat not only shows the shark's power, but exhibits its resistance to domination. Plumwood argues that in a dualized hierarchy of nature and culture, nature is an "irrational and sometimes uncontrollable force" which humans seek to dominate and control.<sup>73</sup> This domination of nature by humans has been ingrained as a "natural" order. The shark here not only exemplifies this uncontrollable nature, but resists domination from humans.

Pauline Couper notes, "To encounter nature on the water is to experience space differently."<sup>74</sup> In *Jaws*, that experience is horrific. Rather than embracing the unknown, the film treats it as a threat. Amplified by the fish's displays of strength, the ocean becomes a horrific space where dangers lurk below. In moving the action to the water, the characters—and the viewer—are forced to exist in a space they do not normally occupy. Couper observes of boating, "Being a mobile body in a restricted and moving

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<sup>73</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 189.

<sup>74</sup> Pauline Couper, "The Embodied Spatialities of Being in Nature: Encountering the Nature/Culture Binary in Green/Blue Space," *Cultural Geographies* 25, no. 2 (2018): 294.

space requires different corporeal knowledge.”<sup>75</sup> Space is not experienced the same in a boat moving across water as it is on dry land. Couper argues for this different experience of space as a possible way of reconnecting with nature. She argues our regular experience of linear space is ingrained in western culture. Couper states:

If our separation from nature is a cultural construct, it is not just an idea. It is materially constructed in the fabric of our towns and cities, not only in the artifacts of bricks and mortar, but in the way we order space. Separation from nature is embedded in how we experience space.<sup>76</sup>

Though Couper argues being on the water has potential to reorient human-animals’ relationship with nature, *Jaws* uses the water to divide it further. Movement across water requires one to pay attention to everything around them, not just what is in front or behind. As Couper notes, in a boat “the possibilities of movement across the visible two dimensions are constrained by the invisible beneath.”<sup>77</sup> In *Jaws*, the “invisible beneath” is used to evoke fear.

The shark’s attack on the boat late at night creates this fear as well. The moment begins with Brody, Quint, and Hooper are inside the boat sitting around a table having just finished eating. The film cuts to a full shot of the boat from the outside as the yellow barrel floats into frame signaling the shark’s return. The camera returns to the men onboard; the frame bobs along with the movement of the ocean. The film cuts away to an extreme close up of part of the boat’s frame. Off screen, the shark rams the boat, cracking and breaking the side and allowing water into the hull. It cuts back to the hunters. They

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<sup>75</sup> Couper, “The Embodied Spatialities of Being in Nature,” 290.

<sup>76</sup> Couper, 294.

<sup>77</sup> Couper, 291.

realize the shark has attacked as the rocking of the boat grows more violent. This rocking suddenly becomes more aggressive. A closet door swings open as junk falls out. Hooper slips as he lunges toward the steering wheel across the room. Brody falls back into the lower level of the boat, and sees it has begun filling with water. The scene cuts away from the chaos of the men scrambling to react to another close up of the boat's hull; the shark attacks again as more water pools on the ship.

The construction of the space here is not as clear as earlier moments. As the shark attacks, it grows increasingly chaotic. Because the shark remains off screen and the shots are framed so tightly, it is unclear where or how it attacks. The water shooting in through the sides of the boat gives the impression that the ocean itself has attacked. As Couper notes, navigating the water requires a different orientation for movement, paying attention to what is beneath the surface as well as what is above. This sequence visually represents the chaos when an unexpected threat from beneath reveals itself. Characters struggle to reorient themselves and react to the new situation. Existing on the water requires a different attention than the land.

## **The Beach**

The final environment depicted in *Jaws* is the Amity's beach. It is a zone of conflict between nature and culture, and exhibits traits of both. The town uses the beach as a tool; the revenue brought in by summer tourists keeps the town afloat all year round. Zan Hammerton and Akkadia Ford recognize the beach as "a liminal space where land meets water" and defies neat definition.<sup>78</sup> In *Jaws*, the beach can be seen as a liminal space

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<sup>78</sup> Zan Hammerton and Akkadia Ford, "Decolonising the Waters: Interspecies Encounters Between Sharks and Humans," *Animal Studies Journal* 7, no. 1 (2018): 278.

between nature and culture as well. It exists between two extremes: Amity Island and the ocean. The town of Amity is safe; the real danger is in the water. The ocean is the shark's domain. Stylistically, the beach is shown with techniques used to depict both the town of Amity and the ocean. The beach has been incorporated as a part of human culture, but the shark's presence disrupts this. Though scenes here begin with a calm and mannered style, when the shark arrives, it becomes more frenetic.

The first major beach scene displays these dueling styles. The scene begins on a crowded beach with a pan left following a woman as she walks from the beach into the water. A boy—Alex—walks out of the water and into the frame, and the camera switches to a pan right, following him as he walks ashore. Alex stops, asking his mother if he can grab his raft and stay in the ocean longer. After she says yes, he walks to the back of the beach. The camera dollies right, following him as he walks to the back of the beach. The camera then dollies back, revealing Brody.

This sequence contains many aspects of classical style described by Bordwell. It plays out in a single long take and frames characters using full shots, until it ends on Brody with a medium close up. Although the camera is in movement, it is not the “free-ranging” camera Bordwell says exemplifies intensified continuity. Bordwell notes that in many New Hollywood films, the camera “prowls even if nothing else budges.”<sup>79</sup> Here however, the camera's movements are only character based, moving only to follow as the boy walks across the beach.

This can be contrasted with moments later when the shark attacks Alex in the water. Brody is on the beach, watching as a group of kids play in the ocean. Beginning

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<sup>79</sup> Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity,” 20.

with an ensemble shot of the group, it then cuts into a quick succession of close ups on the kids, with five shots in only two seconds. The film then shifts to the shark's POV underwater; the camera moves through the water, making its way to Alex's leg, hanging off the back of a raft. Just before the bite, the camera returns to the beach, looking out at the ocean. In the foreground, kids splash in the water, but in the background Alex's arm and the shark's fins peek out of the water. It cuts further in, showing the crowd alert to the attack. There is a splash of blood and water as Alex thrashes against the fish. The camera cut beneath the water as the shark—off screen—drags Alex below. The camera cuts back to Brody and dollies in and zooms out as he realizes the shark has attacked; it looks as if the background is opening up to swallow him. As they begin to realize what has happened, children run from the water back to shore. Parents run toward the water, searching for their children. Brody runs down the beach, attempting to usher people out of the water. The scene ends when Alex's mom rushes to the water calling his name.

This sequence is noticeably faster than the opening moments on the beach. Though it is about the same length of time in the film, it contains many more cuts. The shark's arrival creates a visual disruption in the style, quickening the pace of the scene and heightening the sense of danger. This sequence along with the slower opening show how the beach is placed on both sides of this binary. The single take opening shot aligns the beach with the controlling human culture, whereas the faster attack aligns visually with the more chaotic nature.

Existing between land and sea, beaches have the potential to house meaningful interspecies connection. However, the beach of *Jaws* is treated by the characters as a fully colonized space. At a meeting after Alex's death, the townspeople insist the beach cannot

be closed because it is a necessary element of the town's economy. In conceptualizing how dualistic binaries are constructed, Plumwood identifies a number of features which characterize these dualisms which are seen with the beach in *Jaws*. First, the beach is defined in relation to human needs. Plumwood calls this, "a special case of incorporation, defining the other only in relation to the self, or the self's needs and desires."<sup>80</sup> She argues the "other" is "made part of a network of purposes which are defined in terms of or harnessed to the master's purposes and needs. The lower side is also objectified, without ends of its own which demand consideration on their own account. Its ends are defined in terms of the master's ends."<sup>81</sup> This is at play in *Jaws* as the beach is claimed by the town for its economic needs. The beach is made to be a part of the town, not for the benefit of the beach, but for the town. The beach's needs—or the needs of the ocean—are not considered in the adoption. The shark, despite having a clear claim to the beach as well, is considered a nuisance. Hammerton and Ford note discussions about beaches often ignore debates which "foreground any [non-human] species' right to its own environment and the ethical implications of depriving a species of life in order to facilitate a human's right to pursue leisure activities."<sup>82</sup> Plumwood adds, "The dualising master self does not empathically recognise others as moral kin, and does not recognise them as a centre of desires or needs on their own account."<sup>83</sup> The townsfolk of Amity have dualized the beach, pulling it into the culture side of the binary. The fish's arrival at the beach is tantamount to it reclaiming the space for itself, an attempt to bring it back to nature.

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<sup>80</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 52.

<sup>81</sup> Plumwood, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Hammerton and Ford, "Decolonising the Water," 278.

<sup>83</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 53.

This disruption by the shark is unwanted by Amity because it is unprofitable and disrupts their control of the space. Plumwood notes, “whatever cannot be made use of, commodified, represented in the market, whatever still dares to assert difference, is destroyed.”<sup>84</sup> William Brown similarly notes, “the shark in *Jaws* cannot be incorporated into the money-making system of the beach and must be destroyed for normality (profit-making) to be restored.”<sup>85</sup> Brown adds, “Others are not an opportunity for expansion (be that a cultural, political, ideological, or even military expansion), but a threat.”<sup>86</sup> There is no way for the town to manipulate, control, or spin the shark to make a profit. It only threatens their current system, and has to be destroyed to return control.

### **Conclusion to Chapter III**

The use and depictions of settings in *Jaws* conveys a clear message about the relationship between human culture and the environment. Each of the three main settings has a unique purpose and tone in the film which emphasize a separation between nature and culture.

Amity Island is an extremely typical beach town where not much happens. Scenes within the town have an unmistakably comic tone and classical style and work to background the shark by minimizing its threat. This makes the arrival of the shark and the danger it presents all the more jarring to the townsfolk. The juxtapositions of the town’s security and the potential dangers of the beach and ocean code nature as even more

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<sup>84</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 193.

<sup>85</sup> William Brown, “It’s a Shark Eat Shark World: Steven Spielberg’s Ambiguous Politics,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 2009): 15-16.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, 16.



dangerous. The comparably innocuous town makes the threats of the beach and ocean even more glaring.

The shark hunt on the ocean water moves the film from a small-town comedy to a tense thriller. The style in this half of the film is more quickly cut and tightly framed. When the shark attacks the boat, the editing becomes faster and shots are more tightly framed. Actions play out in a series of closeups rather than a single full shot. Additionally, the characters are forced to navigate space in a way which is unique to the water, remaining aware of what is in front of, behind, and below their boat. The threat in these scenes is typically unseen, making the threatening force the ocean itself.

Finally, the beach is a setting which exists between Amity and the open water. The beach exhibits visual styles that are tied to both Amity and the ocean. Early sequences display a slower, classical style, utilizing few cuts and purposeful camera movements. However, when the shark attacks, the style becomes more frenetic with faster cuts between shots. Though a natural space where human and non-human animals cohabitate, the beach has been taken over by humans. The characters of the film have made the beach a necessity and placed their needs over the needs of the shark. Because the shark is only a disruption to their use of the beach, it has to be destroyed. The treatment of these settings further contributes to a nature culture divide by exaggerating their differences, and amplifying horrific elements of natural spaces.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to interrogate *Jaws* in relation to the environment. As a film depicting interspecies conflict, it is a meaningful text which foregrounds the nature/culture binary and human superiority. This thesis engaged in a careful analysis of the film in order to show how the film both troubles and upholds this divide. It does this first by examining the film's depiction and discussion of human bodies as both subject and object. It then moves on to an investigation of how the film visualizes different environments.

First, this thesis is grounded in literature from environmental communication and media studies. A review of literature analyzing *Jaws* finds that the shark in the film is not an accurate representation of the animal, but is an entirely human construction. Christopher Neff and Beryl Francis both conclude that the shark's legacy as a "killing machine" or "monster fish" is propelled by *Jaws*, but has been cemented by subsequent media reporting which draws on the language of the film. The nature/culture binary is similarly socially constructed. This divide between human culture and nature is based on the assumption that nature is in place for humanity's use. As Plumwood describes, in this hierarchy nature "is treated as a limitless provider without needs of its own."<sup>87</sup> Rather than being separate from nature, humans are tethered to nature. As William Cronon argues, nature is a "creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments

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<sup>87</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 21

in human history.”<sup>88</sup> Because nature is socially constructed, it is inseparable from human culture; human-animals are undeniably part of nature.

The second chapter on seeing people as meat analyzes the ways that the film complicates the gaps in human subjectivity and objectivity. The nature/culture binary creates a hierarchy in which human subjectivity is favored while the subjectivity of non-human nature is dismissed. Similarly, because human subjectivity is foregrounded, human objectivity is not considered; the human perspective becomes the default for understanding nature. Through the use of POV shots from the shark’s perspective, *Jaws* disrupts this experience. Using a killer POV—in which the shark remains off-screen, but the audience sees from its perspective—human bodies are looked at as food. From the shark’s POV, viewers see human bodies as food in the lead up to the attack. However, these bodies are not fully objectified. The film cuts away from the shark’s POV just before the attack, returning above the water to watch the human character react. Identifying with the victims’ pain after having just seen them as an object, the audience recognizes their own objectivity. As Vivian Sobchack says, they experience an “increased awareness of *what it is to be a material object*.”<sup>89</sup> Showing human bodies as both subject and object, the film forces viewers to recognize their own malleable subjectivity. Human-animals are objectified as food while maintaining subjectivity, encouraging a recognition that non-human animals too are not merely an object for consumption, but a subject as well.

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<sup>88</sup>William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7.

<sup>89</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 288.

After the attacks, victims continue to exist as both subject and object. When Hooper conducts his autopsy of the first victim, the corpse is only shown in fragments. The audience sees an arm or a hand, but never the entire body in full, creating an absent referent which diminishes the body's subjectivity. However, the body is still haunted by its subjectivity because viewers have seen the victim before her death. This complex relationship between subject and objectivity can also be found in how characters discuss potential victims. One character notes that leaving the beaches open is "like ringing a dinner bell," drawing a direct connection between humans and their potential to be food.<sup>90</sup> This presentation of human bodies encourages viewers to confront their own objectivity by witnessing the diminished subjectivity of the characters. If characters in the film can be transformed from subject to object—or exists something in between—then the viewers can as well.

While human characters exhibit a complex interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, the shark does not. By contrast, the shark is denied subjectivity, and is treated as an object. When the shark is killed, its death is immediate. It does not agonize or writhe in pain. Instead, it dies in a massive explosion and the remaining bits of it sink toward the ocean floor. Barbara Creed argues, "the image of actual animal death on screen is an ethical space that gives rise to a 'creaturely' gaze with the potential to break down boundaries, to affirm communicability, between human and non-human animals."<sup>91</sup> *Jaws* does not allow a creaturely gaze to develop. The swiftness of the animal's death does not allow the audience to create any sense of identification with the animal. In an instant it goes from alive to dead. Additionally, the characters in the film barely respond

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<sup>90</sup> *Jaws*, Spielberg, 0:50:58.

<sup>91</sup> Creed, "Animal Deaths on Screen," 17.

to the animal's death, with the credits beginning to roll moments after. The special effects used for the shark also objectify the fish. The phony shark is rubbery and mechanical, not reading as an actual living creature. The fakeness of the prop puts a barrier between it and the audience, preventing meaningful identifications from forming.

This analysis shows how *Jaws* complicates human subjectivity by presenting bodies as both subject and object. It recalls Sobchack's notion of interobjectivity which poses the question: "How can I possibly apprehend another objective body as a *nonsubject*—as *in-itself*—at all?"<sup>92</sup> However, the film fails to recognize the subjectivity of others. The non-human shark is not granted the same complex subjectivity as the human characters. Instead, it is treated as an object and destroyed for the sake of human needs.

The third chapter steps away from the shark to focus on the film's depiction of environments and settings. The three major settings in the film—Amity Island, the open water, and the beach—are each depicted with unique visual styles and represent their respective environments differently. The first half of the film—set largely within the town of Amity Island—boasts a more classical style. Conversations between characters are played out in long shots and long takes, and camera movement remains motivated by character movement. Additionally, the inhabitants of Amity attempt to background the shark by ignoring the attacks. Characters evade discussions of the shark, and even outright deny its existence, as the animal is not seen as worth time or attention. This all gives the film's first half a more relaxed and easy tone; viewers' know that in Amity, there is no danger.

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<sup>92</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 312-313.

By contrast, the second, aquatic half of the film, is presented as much more dangerous and chaotic. The traditional cinematic style used to depict the land is replaced with a more intensified continuity, which “is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis.”<sup>93</sup> Long shots are replaced with close ups, and the editing speed and shot length shorten on the water. The frenetic pacing produces a more dangerous feeling than the first, terrestrial, half of the film. The ocean itself is also depicted as a threat here. As Pauline Couper argues, “To encounter nature on the water is to experience space differently.”<sup>94</sup> The shark’s hunters are forced to face a threat that does not just move around them, but can hide below them as well. Though humans typically experience space as in front, behind, and beside them, the water requires attention to what is beneath as well. When the characters attempt to control and track the shark’s movement through this new space, they fail and the shark remains hidden and in control.

The last third the film represents is the beach. The beach is a space which exists between the two extremes of Amity and the ocean, possessing characteristics of each in its visual depiction. Early moments on the beach display a more classical style. Long takes are used to follow characters as they move across the beach, and ensemble shots capture the volume of people there. However, after the shark arrives, the style becomes more intensified. Shots become more tightly framed and editing becomes faster, creating an unnerving and uneasy mood. The shark’s arrival at the beach disrupts a space which had previously been incorporated into human culture. Controlling the beach is integral to the economy of Amity Island, and the shark’s attacks on humans call this control into question. The only way for the characters to restore this relationship is by annihilating the

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<sup>93</sup> Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity,” 16.

<sup>94</sup> Pauline Couper, “The Embodied Spatialities of Being in Nature,” 294.

shark. As Plumwood notes, “whatever cannot be made use of, commodified, represented in the market, whatever still dares to assert difference, is destroyed.”<sup>95</sup> Because the shark cannot be incorporated into the money-making tourism of the beach, it has to be eliminated.

This analysis has demonstrated that although the plot of *Jaws* exemplifies the human dominance of nature, the film’s form presents a more complex relationship. The horror of *Jaws* arrives through the encroachment of nature into human territory; it is nature’s disruption of human perception that evokes fear. Through its use of killer POV, the film is able to decenter the human perspective. Before being attacked, the audience is forced to see humans as the prey of the shark’s gaze. These attacks play out both the horrors of a subject being eaten as well as the fear of objectification. Similarly, the visual style used on the beach and in the water is disrupted by the shark; the animal’s presence transforms the classical shooting and editing into a faster, more frenzied style. It is this disruption in style and the presentation of these attacks which unsettle the viewer. These changes disrupt not only the experience of the watching the film, but also of the viewers’ subjectivity. It forces audiences to recognize their fragile place in ecosystems, but does not question this role or ask audiences to reconcile with nature. Instead, these disruptions are horrific, framing human objectivity as a terrifying, unnatural experience.

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<sup>95</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 193.

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