

A comment on the appeal and phallacy of 'Jaws'

Dedicated to shark fighters of the world, John Foster Dulles and the 'zipless fuck'

by John Russell
Critic-at-large

We are all monsters in our subconscious; that is why we need laws and institutions.

Said by a forgotten character in a forgotten film of nuclear holocaust vintage during bomb shelter years of the nineteen fifties, that remark embodies an escapist cinema some thought we had escaped. Indeed the radiation game and attendant we-are-witness-to-our-own-destruction horrors passed into oblivion with John Foster Dulles. But the Curse of Freud lingers; we are all monsters (subconsciously), and, in the atomic age, as apt to destroy ourselves as to make a peanut butter sandwich. Perhaps because of its own irrationality, Hollywood remains most adept at titillating the neurotic in us all.

Standing in line to see *Jaws*, I thought of John Foster Dulles. There was a panhandler slouching outside the Carolina Theatre in Elizabeth City with his same cheekbones and bulldog elan; a tin cup in one hand, a bottle of MD 20-20 in the other, he scorned the mask of charity. There was art in this man. He was a drunk without pretense and a beggar without a spiel. His one open eye surveyed the line filing past into the theatre; Small town burghers and their families, some teen-agers and their dates, all dressed brightly, incongruous against the dull and narrow facades of Elizabeth City's waterfront district. They were aliens; it was beggar's territory.

"Ya'll must never seen no big fish before," he muttered, chuckling, tin cup resting on one knee.

No one answered. Mothers shepherd children ahead—fathers felt for wallets still in place; couples chatted uncomfortably. A black man drove his demured Plymouth down the one-lane street.

John Foster Dulles would have understood *Jaws*. He appreciated a fait accompli, gloried in the reaction to crisis. Motives, ethics, introspection itself, were all givens in the politics of brinkmanship. By necessity identities were simplified and a propaganda perfected. The enemy was faceless, Godless, relentless, malevolent. Communism was an irrational menace to be resisted with every resource of our moral and economic superiority, even if it meant unleashing Chiang.

Jaws, and the new escapist cinema of which it is the most sophisticated example, also feed on the fait accompli. In *The Exorcist* a young girl is possessed; in *Towering Inferno* a building catches fire; and in *Jaws* a Great White Shark engorges several humans. Each situation releases those involved from thinking beyond their immediate peril. And rightly so, for one does not reason with the irrational, be it represented by demons, fire, sharks or World Communism. Escape for the audience lies in disengagement from complexities of personality and absorption in the problem at hand. How will they banish the devil? put out the fire? kill the shark?

Cynics and cliches

Until *Jaws* Hollywood self-consciously sought to provide a framework of moral issues to externally support its escapist fare. Predictably, that structure often proved an embarrassment. Discussions of man's monstrous subconscious among radiation survivors were sometimes improbable. *The Exorcist's* right-wing Catholicism was distracting. Perhaps most curious of all was the attempt by the makers of *Towering Inferno* to establish that film as a parable to firemen and an indictment of naughty building contractors. Thus, at the movie's absurd conclusion, Steve McQueen climbs down from the ruined building as if he were the sole Spartan survivor of Thermopylae,

exhorting Paul Newman, Faye Dunaway, chastised Athens, *et al*, to build safer skyscrapers lest Acadia go up in flames.

If it had been proclaimed in the opening credits that *Jaws* was dedicated to "Shark fighters, both the living and the dead," I would have left the theatre immediately and thought nothing more about my two dollars and fifty cents. But *Jaws* depends upon no such anodyne. It is a tight film, a good Hollywood movie. Technical accomplishments and the drama generated by the shark's presence ably camouflage the film's shallow and stereotyped characterizations. It is an American movie, a celebration of pragmatism and finesse in conflict with nature.

Peter Benchley is the son of Robert Benchley, a man who, forty years ago, helped shape the escapist art of a less defensive generation. The younger Benchley butchered his own best-selling novel (no great loss) to write the screenplay of the movie version of *Jaws*. Benchley's is a good adaptation, with much of what is cumbersome in the book shorn away. Adultery is the biggest casualty, as Hooper's romance with Brodie's wife never made the script. Benchley liked his work so much that he gave himself a cameo role as a Hitchcock—he was the roving newsman on Amity's Fourth of July beaches.

But the positive aspects of Benchley's adaptation are nearly done in by two external forces—*Moby Dick* and Richard Dreyfuss. *Moby Dick* was Benchley's own fault. Perhaps it is difficult to avoid Melville when one's plot depends upon the pursuit of a killer fish by a determined crew of New England origin, but that coincidence provides all the more reason to try. Benchley didn't. Quint does not discourage the belief, fostered by Captain Ahab, that Yankee ship captains are by nature mentally unbalanced. Hooper is a Starbuck who combats Quint with the religion of technology instead of Melville's original Christian dogma. And as for Ishmael—just call him Brodie—the best "intruder" with a capital 'I' who ever focused a narrative.

Richard Dreyfuss was not Benchley's fault. Fresh from *American Graffiti* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Dreyfuss lends the dimension to Hooper's character one would expect from Beaver Cleaver playing Dorian Gray. No one else does much better in their borrowed roles, but they at least keep from being offensive, which Dreyfuss does not, be he making quasi-profound observations ("The shark is a perfect eating machine") or grotesque allusions to the upcoming "dinner hour" or "smorgasbord" offshore.

Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers

Beyond the fact that *Jaws* is an impressive technical achievement, beyond even the fact that it is a cynical movie, we must finally deal concretely with its enormous appeal. In the WPA gaudiness of that Elizabeth City theatre, there was a genuine tension between viewer and film, a tension of more substance than the simple vicarious fright and relief felt with each shark encounter. There was something more engaging about this film; it was without question a sensation peculiar to the summer of 1975.

Intrigued, I began to examine contemporary sources. Upstaging even Henry Kissinger's garbage in the July 29 issue of *National Enquirer*, seven psychiatrists explain the psychological intricacies of *Jaws*. One of them, Dr. Michael Brady, a professor at the George Washington University Medical School, advances the following opinion:

Great stuff! Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers in a sea setting! We can yell and scream and get rid of all the pent-up tensions of our everyday lives. And there's no violence of man against man, so when the shark finally gets his, we can cheer its death without a qualm...

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