

OCEAN PICTURES:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OCEAN ON FILM

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ABSTRACT

Common filmic tropes of the ocean draw upon ideas that go back to the novels of Herman Melville and Jules Verne, who constructed the ocean respectively as a hostile wilderness and a watery Eden. Two of the earliest and most influential underwater filmmakers, Jacques Cousteau and Jean Painlevé, employed these tropes, as have subsequent filmmakers, especially in their depictions of charismatic ocean fauna. The power of the Eden/wilderness dichotomy of the ocean has spilled over not only from novel to film and from fiction to non-fiction, but into the socio-political sphere of ocean-related controversies like the one that is the subject of my film, *Sealed Off!!!*

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I will discuss how underwater films have constructed the ocean as a place either friendly, desirable, and open to human presence or wild, dangerous, and inhospitable to people. These two tropes, which I term “ocean-as-Eden” and “ocean-as-wilderness” following Carolyn Merchant and William Cronon, have not only spilled over the divide of fiction and nonfiction but have bled from film into the political and social spheres. These tropes even inform ocean-related controversies, such as the one in La Jolla, California, that is the subject of my film, *Sealed Off!!!*

I approach this discussion from three directions. First, I look at two influential maritime novels—and at the films made from them—Moby-Dick (published 1851) and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1869), which exemplify the Eden/wilderness dichotomy. Next I look at two underwater filmmakers, Jean Painlevé and Jacques Cousteau, whose perspectives on the ocean diverged along similar lines. Finally I examine two animals, the dolphin and the shark, which are the emblematic fauna of ocean-as-Eden and ocean-as-wilderness in film. In these three comparisons, I pay special attention to the mediating role of technology. All of the ocean-related films I discuss, whether nonfictional or fictional, dramatize a triple encounter between the body, the ocean, and an enabling technology. The second level of mediation, through which these ocean concepts enter the social and political spheres, belongs to the camera itself, which has made the ocean, whether Edenic or wild, as seemingly familiar to us as the sky above our heads. In my film, *Sealed Off!!!*, I attempt to demonstrate how those involved in an ocean-related controversy thoughtlessly deploy tropes of Eden and wilderness to endorse their claims.

THE OCEAN: EDEN AND WILDERNESS

The tropes of Eden and wilderness are much more powerful, in the final analysis, than direct empirical experience or scientific knowledge of the ocean. Most of us arrive at our understanding of the ocean through its intersection with the human body through technology, which serves as an extension of the body. Without technology, we would be blind, deaf, dumb, and mostly immobile in the water. We require cyborg bodies with flippered feet, goggled eyes, wetsuits, and artificial lungs to enter it, and even to float on the ocean surface, we need a ship, which is a simulacrum of land. This epistemological reality is most evident in science. Oceanographic knowledge is a near-total technological feat. Rozwadowski and van Keuren write:

Depending on which technology an observer chooses—side-scan sonar, bathythermograph, gravimeter, and so on—he or she will be viewing some aspect of the marine environment facilitated, yet limited by, the collection range and capabilities of a specific technology. Oceanography, in effect, creates composite pictures produced by a synthesis of different media of observation. It can be argued that oceanography in many ways is technology writ large. (xiii)

Very few of us use sonar and bathythermographs, however, to understand the ocean. We have common knowledge of it, not scientific knowledge, and the instrument of our knowledge is the motion picture camera. The camera, at the hands of underwater filmmakers, seems to annihilate the physical boundaries that separate us from the ocean. What underwater filmmakers give us are not oceanographic data, but constructions—myths—of the ocean. In using the term “myth” I follow Roland Barthes, who explains that myth is a semiological system which begins when a “form” (in our case, “ocean”), itself the product of a prior linguistic semiological system, is united to a “concept”—a

bigger idea, such as “Eden.” The concept (Eden) empties the form (ocean) of its history, specificity, and contingency, then refills it with ideology. Barthes calls this relationship “signification,” and once it takes root it is, he writes, “the myth itself.” Myths become naturalized to experience and eventually accepted without question. Even the process of myth-making itself disappears (121-131). Underwater films, I argue, have performed such significations and engendered myths of the ocean now utterly naturalized as common knowledge. Over time, these potent significations have become canonized into the tropes that I name ocean-as-Eden and ocean-as-wilderness.

By wilderness I do not mean the post-Romantic sentimental notion implied in the phrase “wilderness experience,” where “pristine nature” serves as a salubrious sanctuary from the ills of society. Following William Cronon, I define wilderness as the threatening, unsafe space *between* desirable, civilized zones, inhabited by monsters and devils, the inhospitable place of moral or physical confrontation, loss, decay, which the Romantics enshrined in the notion of the sublime (“Wilderness” 69-90). Eden, by contrast, represents the safe, inexhaustible oasis populated by friendly and subjugated beasts, our paradisiacal, aboriginal home, garden, and playground. The role of humans in Eden is to be both the master and steward of nature. The Edenic ocean has a positive valence—the ocean is a desirable place to be—while the ocean-as-wilderness is a menacing, repellent, inaccessible one.

To understand the role of technology in these two ideas, I follow Carolyn Merchant, who has identified two strains in the Western view of nature (of which the ocean is both physically and philosophical a part): progressivism and declensionism

(Merchant 11-38). Ocean-as-Eden is a progressive model whereby technology provides access to the ocean, revealing a paradise plentiful, clean, innocent, and beautiful. In contrast, the ocean-as-wilderness is a declensionist vision. In spite of the technology that people bring to bear on it, the ocean resists human dominion. If we try to conquer or to save it, the result for us is only waste, failure, and even death.

I identify these tropes as tools of analysis for a group of films which I will call a “genre of ocean.” Films in the genre of ocean, whether fiction or nonfiction, dramatize the convergence I have described of the human body and the ocean via a scientific or technological apparatus. In most analyses, the presence of the ocean does not set a film apart. *Jaws* (1975), for example, more often would be part of a discussion that includes *Psycho* (1960), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), or *Friday the 13th* (1980) but not part of one including *The Silent World* (1956) or *Flipper* (1963) (Carroll 97-128, Tudor 72-73, Wood 63-85, Worland 94-104). In coining “the genre of ocean” I follow Leo Braudy, who has described a “genre of nature” in fiction film. Braudy asserts that there is a mode in popular fiction films of collective, open-ended meditation on nature. He sees “a fundamentalist search for master myths through which nature can be both revealed and conquered by story,” which is to say, nature is never quite a fiction, even in a fictional plot (278-281). So it goes with the ocean, a subset of nature whose unique characteristic is physical inaccessibility, where the need for narratives and myths to “reveal and conquer” is even more intense.

SOURCES: MELVILLE AND VERNE, HUSTON AND DISNEY

The human mind delights in grand conceptions of supernatural beings. And the sea is precisely their best vehicle, the only medium through which these giants (against which terrestrial animals, such as elephants or rhinoceroses, are as nothing!) can be produced or developed.

—Jules Verne, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (14)

The tropes of ocean as wilderness and Eden have their roots in the maritime literary narratives of the immediate pre-film era. Herman Melville's Moby-Dick and Jules Verne's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea exemplify the distinction. Moby-Dick is an encounter, mediated by technology (mainly, the *Pequod*), between a captain pursuing revenge and a latter-day Leviathan, the proverbial beast of the underwater wilderness. Verne's novel, which appeared less than twenty years later, answers Melville's nightmarish vision with an Edenic one. The ocean menace that sets the stage in 20,000 Leagues turns out to be a futuristic man-made vessel (the *Nautilus*), piloted by the erudite Captain Nemo. While in Melville's novel, human technology fails to conquer the ocean, in Verne's, technology provides access to an ocean that is both unfallen and redemptive, a paradisiacal garden where Nemo lives as an aquatic-technological Adam, both master and steward. Moby-Dick and 20,000 Leagues have been made into films on three occasions contemporaneously with each other. In the most celebrated pair, John Huston's 1956 *Moby-Dick* and Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), the directors canonize the visions of Melville and Verne. Huston's *Moby-Dick* is a streamlined gothic horror film set on a wild and hostile ocean, and Disney's *20,000 Leagues* a pleasant, rollicking, a fun-filled musical adventure at sea.

Ahab's encounter with the white whale in Melville's novel occurs, of course, in the watery medium of the ocean, where technology, in the form of the *Pequod*, sets the limit of his power. In Leo Marx's analysis, the ocean surface is the edge of wilderness to which Ahab drive blindly out of technological bounds (313). The only master of the wilderness is the whale himself, a familiar creature that Melville constructs as a monster. The film philosopher Noel Carroll writes, "The monsters of horror breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story" (16). Moby Dick is indeed a profane hybrid of god and devil, human and animal, natural and supernatural. When first spotted, the whale seems sublimely beautiful to Ishmael and the crew—"not Jove did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam"—but conceals his true, horrific nature: "...Moby Dick moved on, still withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wretched hideousness of his jaw" (455). Though an animal, the whale reveals a human taste for vengeance that rivals Ahab's. Indeed Melville takes the whale's humanity for granted in almost every reference: "[he] seemed only intent on annihilating each separate plank of which those boats were made" (464). The whale's wrinkled skin, furthermore, gives him a corpseslike, undead aspect, confirmed by an almost supernatural invincibility to harpoons that is noted many times in the novel.

John Huston's 1956 film excises the natural history and whaling lore from Melville's novel, sharpening it into a lean, suspenseful, expressionistic horror film in which the ocean is a gothic wilderness (Bunnell 79-101). In the film's opening scenes, Ishmael wanders down to the sea over land that is sunny, safe, and beautiful. By contrast,

New Bedford is home to madmen, savages, thunder, and ominous dark figures. Into this borderland, the ocean seeps, drenching the town in expressionistic darkness. Once the *Pequod* is at sea, the gothic thoroughly inundates the picture. The boat is no less than a floating castle; storms and apparitions abound; the whale a ghost, a corpse, and a god. At the first sighting of Moby Dick, the crew gathers in disbelief, “Aye we all see it,” one sailor mutters, “but that don’t mean it’s real, necessarily.”

Jules Verne’s novel 20,000 Leagues answers Melville’s wilderness vision with a vision of the ocean as Eden. Verne borrows Melville’s exposition, even the details of his creature, but literalizes the uncanny consciousness of Moby Dick by giving his “creature” a manmade shell and a human brain. When the character of Aronnax first spots the supposed whale by daylight the first time, he retains the impression that it lives:

There, a mile and a half from the frigate [Aronnax’s vessel, the *Abraham Lincoln*], a long blackish body emerged a yard above the waves. Its tail, violently agitated, produced a considerable eddy. Never did a caudal appendage beat the sea with such violence. (43)

But this creature is no animal, it is the *Nautilus*, a futuristic vessel—Nemo’s technological shell—that enables the captain to hold dominion over the sea. The whale’s wilderness of Moby Dick becomes an Edenic ocean ruled by a man who is both its master and steward. The *Nautilus* allows Nemo to be, according to his own motto, *moblilis in mobile*, “fluid in a fluid medium,” free from the tyranny and oppression that inhabit land. “The sea does not belong to tyrants,” he tells Aronnax, “...thirty feet below, their power ceases” (quoted in Steinberg 122). Nemo can also keep the ocean’s cornucopia to himself. Like the Biblical Adam, the captain is alone in a fruitful garden:

Sometimes I hunt in the midst of this element, which appears to be inaccessible to man, and quarry the game which dwells in my submarine forests. My flocks, like those of Neptune's old shepherds, graze fearlessly in the immense prairies of the ocean. I have a vast property here, which I cultivate myself, and which has always been sown by the hand of the Creator of all things. (75)

To Aronnax aboard the *Nautilus*, the ocean is a global aquarium. Verne offers up a bright, diverse ocean for the reader's consumption. Certainly, the creatures he describes do exist, but we understand Aronnax's observations to be, if not what definitely *is* in the ocean, then at least what *might* be. For the readers who have found inspiration in these pages, including Jacques Cousteau, the difference is negligible. One of many similar passages reads:

For two whole hours an aquatic army escorted the *Nautilus*... I distinguished the green labre; the banded mullet, marked by a double line of black; the roundtailed goby, of a white colour, with violet spots on the back; the Japanese scombrus, a beautiful mackerel of those seas, with a blue body and a silvery head; the brilliant azurors, whose name alone defies description...(105)

Disney's film version of *20,000 Leagues* freely adapts Verne's novel, realigning its human, technological, and natural forces into a clearer set of oppositions which serves a vision of the Edenic ocean informed by 1950s Cold War America. Disney's screenwriter Earl Felton decided to concentrate on Ned Land, who cuts a swashbuckling, street-brawling, shanty-singing figure in Kirk Douglas's portrayal. A far cry from Verne's character, Douglas embodies Disney's pro-American values: strength, good humor, and ingenuity. Ultimately it is Land who defeats the giant squid, the snake in Verne's garden, revealing the heart of gold beneath his rough exterior.

The redrawn Land contrasts sharply with Disney's Nemo. The captain bears the unmistakable marks of a Cold War villain in his appearance, taste, conduct, and finally in

his fate. Sporting a full, dark beard and a crisp, aristocratic sea uniform, James Mason's Nemo is the picture of a stereotypical Soviet naval captain. In contrast to Nemo's ascetic style in the novel (his quarters "had a severe, almost monkish aspect"), Disney's Nemo lavishly decorates his rooms, like a gothic haunted house, including the music room where he plays Bach fugues that echo sinisterly through the ship's hulls. Even his food, which was succulent in Verne's novel, is too strange and foreign even for the gracious Aronnax. By characterizing Nemo as aristocratic and decadent, Disney's production renders him a suspicious, decidedly un-American person. Possession of the oceans by such a man is unacceptable in Disney's ocean Eden. At the end of the movie the sea preserves the likes of Ned Land, but when the *Nautilus* goes down, it takes the brooding, intellectual madman into oblivion.

THE FROGMEN: PAINLEVÉ AND COUSTEAU

The French filmmakers Jacques Cousteau (1910-1997) and Jean Painlevé (1902-1989) depicted the underwater world for nonfiction in ways that also exemplify the ocean-as-Eden and ocean-as-wilderness dichotomy. Cousteau, who once called Verne's 20,000 Leagues his Bible (Vermont Public Radio), embodies Verne's dream of an Edenic ocean by making himself both the master and the steward of the underwater world in his film *Le Monde du Silence* (*The Silent World*, 1956). Where Cousteau prefers the adventuresome, picturesque, and playful aspects of the sea, Painlevé accesses the "depths" of a world too diminutive for unaided observation. He too makes sport of the ocean, but poetically rather than athletically, by reveling in anthropomorphic metaphors that tend toward the surreal. Painlevé's ocean is a wilderness populated by uncanny, even monstrous hybrids, like that of Melville and Huston, but his films are far more whimsical than horrible.

Cynthia Chris accurately calls *The Silent World* "less a wildlife film...than an adventure undertaken by men living off the sea's consumable resources" (42). Like Captain Nemo, Jacques Cousteau masters the wonders of the ocean, which his technology reveals as Edenic in nature. Cousteau's *Calypso* is a godchild of the *Nautilus*, a wondrous technological assembly, and his underwater breathing apparatus enables a degree of access to the undersea world right out of Verne's imagination. Through technology, Cousteau's divers become "menfish" swimming naked and free in the open ocean (Cousteau 6).

Cousteau constructs ocean inhabitants as friendly, playful children for him to patronize and subjugate. He leaves no doubt that through technology, “man” expresses his right of dominion over animals. Unlike them, “he” has created the means to traverse a natural boundary, “that molecular tissue which is actually a wall between elements,” whereas they have not (Cousteau 236). Porpoises, for example, are intelligent and have a good sense of humor, Cousteau tells us in the film, and call to each other “in their little squeaky voices.” Cousteau’s voice over serves up a series of similar *plaisantries* at the animals’ expense. “A sea turtle ride is a lot of fun,” he tells us, as one of his divers grips the shell of the enormous turtle, which struggles under the weight, “But they don’t steer very well. Besides the turtle must go up to breathe.” When his divers enter the water with scraps of meat to lure fish closer, a big grouper whom they name Ulysses follows them, and soon they have the fish swimming in circles: “Ulysses, may I have the next waltz?” Empowered by a well-armed boat and equipped with a state-of-the-art life-support system, Cousteau has complete run of the underwater world.

The human’s only challenger for mastery of the deep is the shark. In the book version of The Silent World, which Cousteau published six years before the movie, his encounter with the great white is demoralizing:

What we saw made us feel that naked men really do not belong in the sea....At a distance of forty feet there appeared from the gray haze the lead-white bulk of a twenty-five-foot *Carcharodon carcharias*, the only shark species that all specialists agree is a confirmed man-eater.” (225)

In the film version, Cousteau’s encounter with sharks—which is not, in this case, with great whites—is an assertion mastery. While following a group of sperm whales, the *Calypso* maims one of the pups with its propeller. Sharks soon appear from all directions

to pick over the carcass, and the divers enter a shark cage, fascinated but fearful. Soon the crew decides to “avenge” the dead whale (though it was they who originally killed it), and begin hoisting the sharks onto the boat then bludgeoning, torturing, and decapitating them. As Cynthia Chris has pointed out, the scene is shocking for its brutality (41-42). This is Cousteau the master, not the conservationist Cousteau whose later popular book on sharks he titled “Splendid Savage of the Sea.”

The shark-cage sequence is the first in a series of similar ones in subsequent underwater films. In Peter Gimbel’s *Blue Water White Death* (1971), the photographers, unsatisfied with the shark footage they get from cages, one-up Cousteau and leave their technology behind to swim freely among feeding sharks and film them. Valerie Taylor, one of the divers and a spearfishing champion, darts about stunning sharks that approach too closely. In one dramatic shot, she stuns a shark, which spirals helplessly into the depths. In the tradition of Cousteau, Gimbel and his crew assert mastery in the ocean with technology. Shark-cage technology fails Hooper in Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*, however. Richard Dreyfus’s marine biologist spends the film’s climax hiding under a rock once the great white mangles his cage.

Cousteau’s ocean, however, is not always an Eden. At times it is a deserted wilderness where the ghosts of dead ships lurk like underwater haunted houses. His early wreck dives are war casualties, the hidden signs of the destroyed French nation. When he explores them, Cousteau, like Huston, invokes the gothic. In *The Silent World*, Cousteau and crew locate a munitions ship that went down in 1941. The sequence’s soundtrack consists of magnified breathing to decidedly spooky effect. The explosive ring of the

ship's bell, banged with a rock by a diver, pierces Cousteau's silent world. A nondiegetic disembodied female voice pronounces the name written on the bell as if reading the name off a tombstone: "Thistlebong, Glasgow." Gothic music swells and accompanies the divers down a gaping pipe, through threatening tangles of iron and overgrowths of coral. Though not exactly a monster in Neil Carroll's estimation, a haunted house, or its underwater equivalent, is a kind of horrifying hybrid (43). Shipwrecks are sites of human death, but teem with submarine life. They are both graveyards and nurseries where coral reef communities thrive, as Cousteau shows us.

Cousteau's nightmarish wreck-diving sequences are the exception to his vision. Jean Painlevé's ocean, by contrast, is an underwater wilderness through and through. Painlevé visits a microscopic alien world, inaccessible to humans but replete with bizarre sea monsters: the spiny, slippery, flabby, bulbous, and clawed, including the urchin, crab, shrimp, spider, seahorse, and jellyfish. Cousteau's adventure is physical, while Painlevé positions himself as a cerebral scientist on an exclusively visual underwater adventure. If Cousteau is a Martin Johnson or a Merian Cooper of the underwater world, then Painlevé is a Niko Tinbergen or a Konrad Lorenz (Mitman 59-61). Painlevé's approach, however, is anything but the cold science of these animal behaviorists. Visually and verbally, Painlevé indulges in an anthropomorphic lyricism generally forbidden in scientific discourse (Frostic 10-14). His creatures exemplify the uncertain ontological status that Noel Carroll associates with horror creatures like *Moby Dick*, the half human, undead whale. As Ralph Rugoff has written, Painlevé's filmmaking approach is "an adventure in the aesthetics of uncanniness" (49-50).

One of Painlevé's first underwater films, *The Seahorse* (1934), exemplifies his anthropomorphic treatment of the animal. He chose the subject, he writes, because its hybridity fascinated him. The seahorse "joins the most virile effort with the most maternal care" (xiii). In his script he describes the seahorse as both "strange" and "ordinary," both half-horse and half-caterpillar, as well as "the only fish to have a prehensile tale" like a primate's. In the seahorse's eye, Painlevé reads its most human aspects: "a pompous air," "a bored appearance," "a look of anxiety." The ocular emphasis culminates in an almost uncomfortably long full-frame shot of the eye. Similarly in his last underwater film, *The Love Life of the Octopus* (1965), Painlevé locates animal consciousness in the eye, and shares the creature's gaze, as it were, as the narrator intones, "It has folds which resemble eyelids." The disembodied eye recalls John Berger's description of the visual encounter between human and animal, occurring "across a narrow abyss of comprehension." Though the look of the animal may seem (uncannily) familiar, Berger writes, "The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man" (4). If the eye is the window to the soul, the animal eye is a tinted one that confirms a consciousness that remains elusive. Huston deploys the same principal in the climactic scene of *Moby Dick*, which cuts between Ahab and the whale's eye. In a series of reverse angles, Jonathan Burt recognizes "an intensifying drive towards an impossible identification" (68). Ahab's maniacal quest for mastery hurls him headlong against more than one inviolable boundary. He cannot cross the waterline, and he cannot, finally, know the whale's soul—

self-knowledge eludes him. With his seahorse and octopus, Painlevé takes us, whimsically, to the same brink of near-comprehension.

If we return to Noel Carroll and his useful definition of the horror creature—it must be both “other” and threatening—we can see that though Painlevé’s seahorse and octopus may represent the animal other—hybrid, alien, indeterminate, incomprehensible—they are not, after all, *dangerous*. Painlevé represents the ocean-as-wilderness trope because for him the underwater world is inaccessible and inhospitable, but it is not a horror. Painlevé hints only whimsically at the danger of his subjects. In *The Love Life of the Octopus*, for example, the octopus flattens its suckers to the aquarium glass. Because of the framing, which matches the shape of the glass, the suckers seem to press at the very film screen. Once the initial *trompe l’oeil* wears off, the effect is more funny than menacing.

While Jacques Cousteau tramps about the world’s oceans, feasting on lobster, riding the backs of turtles, and bludgeoning sharks, Painlevé observes another set of ocean wonders with delicacy and engagement, anthropomorphizing animals, though not as a tool of dominion. Subsequent natural history ocean adventurers-cum-filmmakers such as Peter Gimbel, John Hardy Jones, James Cameron, and Rob Stewart owe much more to Cousteau than to Painlevé, of course, but the latter’s obscure aesthetic is not entirely lost. Whenever these filmmakers pause in the contemplation of a jellyfish, as Cameron does in his *Aliens of the Deep* (2005), or hold on the long close-up of a dolphin’s eye, as we see in Hardy Jones’s “The Dolphin Defender” (*Nature*, 2005), the idiosyncratic vision of Painlevé seems not altogether closed.

FLIPPERIZATIONS: DOLPHIN AND SHARK

A naked man swimming in the sea mingles with and observes life around him and may be watched by other swimmers, and the recording eye of the lens. His advent means the end of superstition.

—Jacques Cousteau (208)

Herman Melville and Jules Verne set the standard in Anglo-American culture for depiction of the ocean as either an Eden or a wilderness, and Huston, Disney, Cousteau, and Painlevé translated those visions into film. Even within particular works, however, the ocean slides between the poles of Eden and wilderness. Verne-Disney's aquarium ocean hides the menace of the giant squid; the joyful energy of Cousteau's sea conceals dark, haunted wrecks; and Painlevé's microscopic wilderness, though inhospitable to man, is an uncanny thrill. In all these films, the animal-Other represents the ocean in its technological encounter with the human body. Iconic creatures like dolphins, seahorses, whales, sharks, and cephalopods (squid and octopus) serve as emblems of particular ocean tropes.

In this system, the dolphin is the exemplary friendly beast of the ocean Eden, while the shark is the preeminent monster of the underwater wilderness. In the following section I will examine how the filmic constructions of these two charismatic ocean megafauna follow the tropes of the ocean I have described, and also how their constructions have been informed by science. Rhetorically speaking, the goal of science has been to illuminate the darkness of the ocean and bring about the "end of superstition" that Jacques Cousteau mentions in the quote above. What we find, however, is that such depictions merely replace one trope with the other, as little-known, mysterious, or

dangerous species become familiar, beloved, and vulnerable. I give the name “Flipperization” to the ontological journey of a sea creature from relative obscurity, and even negative status, to a cherished status that demands political protection. The name intentionally echoes the term “Disneyfication,” a word scholars have used to describe the transformation of the animal image at the hands of Walt Disney Studios which began in earnest with *Bambi* (1942), continued throughout the True-Life Adventures series (1948-1960), and still goes on (Chris 28-41, Mitman 109-114). Gregg Mitman writes, “To a wider public, Disney’s nature—benevolent and pure—captured the emotional beauty of nature’s grand design, eased the memories of the death and destruction of the previous decade, and affirmed the importance of America as one nation under God.” (110) The roots of Flipperization lie in Disney’s project, but it is separate in practice. Disney’s domain was largely land-based animals. The “True-Life Adventures” about the ocean—*Seal Island* (1948), *Mysteries of the Deep* (1959), and *Islands of the Sea* (1960)—never went beyond the shallows, and none were features. Ivan Tors, the producer directly responsible for Flipper and its spinoff television show (1964-1966), as well as the similarly themed *Namu, The Killer Whale* (1966), is more properly responsible for the phenomenon. Tors borrowed Disney’s ideology to surpass Cousteau in the Edenic reconstruction of the underwater animal.

The dolphin’s image as the emblematic species of ocean-as-Eden—intelligent, friendly, even superior to humans—was not always so. At the beginning of the century, fishermen were the only people who had any contact with dolphins, and considered them mere fish-stealing rascals. By the 1963 release of the Ivan Tors production *Flipper*, the

dolphin had been thoroughly reconstructed in the popular imagination. Mitman traces the change from its beginnings at the Marine Studios ocean theme park, which opened in 1938. Marine studios debuted operant conditioning to the public in the mid-1950s. Trainers rewarded specific behaviors—usually those that resembled human actions, such as fin flapping (the wave hello) and head-nodding (laughter)—until the animals could repeat them on cue. Operant conditioning makes particular use of dolphins’ aggressive courting and sexual behaviors, which shocked scientists at Marine Studios early on (Mitman 157-161). Such behaviors, certainly, never made explicit appearance in the park’s entertainment shows, but were readily interpreted by audiences in naïvely anthropomorphic fashion. The animal signs of operant conditioning greatly expanded the potential of animal performance, both live and filmed.

Using operant conditioning techniques, *Flipper* constructs a friendship between the boy Sandy and a dolphin, played by “Mitzie,” who was a resident of Marineland of the Pacific, the world’s second ocean theme park. The naïve anthropomorphism of *Flipper*, as David Ingram writes, exemplifies how “animal subjectivity constructed in such a way that the Other becomes the Same, and the animal otherness is denied,” which was also typical of the early Disney films (92). Flipper and Sandy’s friendship is founded on simple signs and the exchange of fish—the very interactions of operant conditioning—but narratively, the relationship is a nature-borne redemption. Sandy and Flipper’s friendship heals the various ruptures of the film, those between human and animal, father and son, and husband and wife.

Flipper's status, in the eyes of Sandy's father, Porter, evolves from pest to friend. Porter's opinion belongs to the older view, when fishermen referred to dolphins as "pig fish" and "herring hogs" because they would steal from their nets (Mitman 158). Porter tells Sandy, "They tear our nets, they eat our fish. If they come, we'll kill them. Even Flipper." Not until Flipper saves Sandy from a shark is the father convinced that dolphins are indeed, in his words, "friends to man." An age-old prejudice gives way to a higher order of communion with nature. "My son, a child as in the Bible," Porter's voice over goes, "led me to an understanding of their kind." With Porter's conversion, which is inspired by innocence and religious in tone, the dolphin has been utterly Flipperized.

Flipper's confrontation with the shark in the protection of innocence (Sandy) cements its reputation. Indeed the dolphin and the shark have come to be ocean nemeses, with the intelligent, friendly, nurturing dolphin allied to humans against the shark, the cruel, amoral killing machine. We readily recast the animals as antagonists in a classic struggle of good vs. evil. A 2008 episode of the BBC's *Natural World* called "Saved By Dolphins," for example, reenacts a November 2004 incident in New Zealand in which a pod of dolphins herded four lifeguards to safety at the approach of a great white shark. The show leaves no doubt that the dolphins made a deliberate, altruistic decision to save the swimmers. The level of naïve anthropomorphism in the explanation reveals the stability of the popular images of both this "human of the sea" and the man-eating shark. Hardy Jones raises the level of rhetoric even further in "The Dolphin Defender" (*Nature*, 2005). He films dolphins warding off a hammerhead shark, and apprehends though his underwater listening device—technology, again the lynchpin in the encounter—that they

were disorienting the shark with vocalizations. In Hardy Jones's estimation, morally superior dolphins have weaponized speech in order to dominate the grim, mute monsters of the sea. Like humans—including, Nemo, Cousteau, and Hardy Jones himself—dolphins use technology to assert dominance in the underwater realm. Hardy Jones's dolphins exemplify the perspective of John Lilly's book Man and Dolphin (1961), a highly optimistic, popular book likening dolphins to an alien life form. Lilly accorded the imminent communication breakthrough with dolphins a Copernican significance. "We must strip ourselves," he writes, "of our preconceptions of *Homo sapiens* in the scheme of nature" (3).

No film has had a stronger impact on the popular understanding of the dolphin's nemesis, the shark, than Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (Rafferty, Goldman). Reversing the tide of Verne's response to Melville, Spielberg's horror film answered an era's excessive optimism about the ocean with a nightmare of wilderness. In Spielberg's vision, technology is either absent or fails in the encounter with the sea monster. In the film's stunning opener, the first victim swims naked, altogether devoid of technology. The shark in *Jaws* can not only sink boats, as Moby Dick can, but it can burn out motors, sink floating barrels, repel bullets, and crush cages. Its animal power makes a mockery of human technology and reminds us, as Moby Dick had, that we have no dominion in the water.

Spielberg originally hoped to produce his film using *only* live shark footage. He wanted to "legitimatize" his film with a connection to natural history. He thought a captive live shark could be trained to perform the stunts he would require. Spielberg, like

Huston before him, ultimately employed an artificial sea monster—affectionately named “Bruce” and built by the same engineer who made Disney’s giant squid for *20,000 Leagues*—and brought it on location, then combined this footage with some of live sharks in the wild. Natural history cinematographers Ron and Valerie Taylor, who with Peter Gimbel had shot *Blue Water White Death*, supplied the supplemental footage. The Taylors and Gimbel had crossed the world in a boat hoping to film the great white, and almost failed due to the species’ elusiveness. Ironically, only a few years later *Jaws*, with their help, placed the shark threat vividly in our own backyard. Valerie Taylor has said, “I’m very fortunate to have started diving when the ocean was what nature intended it to be, not as man has made it” (McCausland). She might well have been referring to the ocean as it was conceived prior to the 1975, the year of *Jaws*’ release and a watershed in the popular view of the ocean.

Jaws constructed both a monster and an industry: its unprecedented success (it was the first film to break the \$100 million mark in box office sales) not only spawned imitators in Hollywood but determined the course of nonfiction underwater filmmaking. The watershed is summed up best in the promotional trailer for Discovery Channel’s 20th anniversary broadcast of the series *Shark Week*. The promo mimics a sequence, actually from *Jaws 2* (1978), where Brody seems to spot a shark just beyond the breakwater. Frantic, the promo’s Roy Scheider stand-in raises the alarm, but the sunbathers on the beach respond to his cries of “Shark! Shark!” by charging *into* the water as the Discovery logo appears.

While nonfiction shark films since *Jaws* have toyed with Flipperizing the shark, laboring in different degrees to correct the many misconceptions that the film engendered, they have found the horror aesthetics of *Jaws* irresistible. Most often shark films employ the same now familiar close-ups and nightmarish music up front, leaving the education/conservation message for the end. *Shark Week* is exemplary in this regard: It employs a range of plotlines and visual techniques familiar from fiction, often rendered in crude reconstructions, to spin real-life shark attack stories. The series, however, ends in an episode in which the model for *Jaws*' Quint, the real-life shark hunter Frank Mundus, gets a conservationist's view of South Africa's flying great whites. Today Mundus, who pioneered sportfishing for sharks, opposes shark tournaments like the annual ones in Montauk, New York (Cohen).

Shark Week and other shows in its ilk, including the BBC's *Blue Planet* (2002), and *Planet Earth* (2007), and Anglia Television's *Jurassic Shark* (2000), slide between *Jaws*' tried, true, and marketable ocean-wilderness aesthetic to a message of hope for a return to Eden, or at least to pre-1975. These documentaries all focus to some degree on the numerous species of sharks that never attack people—those species unfairly linked to the maneaters—but all come up against the fact that great whites *do* kill people, even in miniscule numbers (236 recorded attacks since 1876) (Raffaele 42). The legacy of *Jaws* rears its head in the final moments of these shows as the great white, gliding ominously, baring teeth, or leaping from the water in full glory, makes the show-stopping appearance.

Other recent shark films have rather sought to draw attention to the conservation issue of shark finning. The connection may be tenuous between *Jaws* and the demand for shark fin soup in Shanghai, but apathy toward the wholesale killing of sharks might arguably be traced to the film. In *Sharkwater* (2007) the filmmaker Rob Stewart makes an impassioned plea against the vilifying and killing of sharks. He cleverly infuses the cause with a narcissistic, bare-chested personal adventure, making him very much the descendant of seafaring filmmaker-adventurers like Cousteau's and Gimbel's crew. Also in love with technology, Stewart traipses across continents with case upon case of underwater and film gear, fleeing persecutors who oppose his investigation. Politically and physically, Stewart is a shark-hugger: Fully equipped in a frog suit, he literally embraces a shark for the camera, professing his great love for the "harmless" animals. *Sharkwater* unhesitatingly Flipperizes the shark and invites us to reimagine them not as monsters but as fellow residents of an oceanic Eden.

LOCAL TROPES: *SEALED OFF!!!*

Harbor seals are not usually at the level of sharks and dolphins when it comes to signifying the ocean as an Eden or a wilderness in film. Not unless the topic is the beach in La Jolla, California, my hometown, that is the setting for my thesis film. My film concerns the controversy that erupted when a pod of seals took over the beach twenty years ago, and I intend for the film to reveal how the tropes of ocean I have discussed in this essay seep into social and political debates about nature. The film is interview-intensive, but rather than using interviews journalistically to relate facts and state arguments, I employ an aesthetic approach that privileges visual and verbal excess, revealing the subjects' personal motivations and prejudices. I follow Bill Nichols's definition of documentary excess, "the noise that remains when we agree upon limits for what will pass as information" (Nichols 141). What might seem irrelevant to a debate is actually the center of my film. Ultimately, I do not take a side in this controversy, but neither do I offer an "objective" point of view. My position is rather a third subjectivity that acknowledges the deadlock of pro-con debates about nature.

The La Jolla benefactress Ellen Browning Scripps built the "Children's Pool" beach in 1931. She paid for the construction of a sea wall that still keeps back the waves, making it a safe place to swim for children. Long before the seals arrived in about 1993—or returned, depending the point of view—the beach had begun to fill with sand due to coastal currents impeded by the wall. The wall itself had fallen into disrepair, and the site was mostly unused. With the seals' appearance, the Children's Pool became polluted with fecal coliform bacteria from the seals' waste. Nonetheless the seals' sudden

presence galvanized the public. Pro-seal activists who feared people might injure seals began trying to bar visitors going onto the sand. In turn, the few residents who still frequented the beach began to harass the activists. Shouting matches and minor physical altercations became commonplace at the site. After a dramatic protest by a local swim club involving several arrests, the question landed in the courts.

Any beach is a borderland between the solid ground that is our own natural habitat and the generally inaccessible ocean; in this case, it has also become a battleground of ideas. The combatants of this controversy stand on either side of the Eden/wilderness divide in their conceptions of the ocean, and by extension, of nature. Like many similar places in California, La Jolla has been constructed both physically and philosophically as a place to commune with nature (Cronon, “Nature” 23-34). For those on the anti-seal side of the question (or “pro-beach,” to use their term), mostly affluent locals, the Children’s Pool—and indeed the ocean and the rest of nature—exist for their enjoyment. The beach is an extension of their California Eden, a monument to their quality of life. By contrast, the pro-seal activists characterize this beach as a place that humans have destroyed through their activity. The argument goes that if the seals want this beach, we should let them have it, since people have taken everywhere else away from them. Nature worldwide is in crisis; leave the seals alone, and let the wall crumble; Mother Nature, in the end, will take it back and sort it out. The proper human place in nature is to stand at the sidelines of this reclamation and take a lesson.

In their substance, the interviews in *Sealed Off!!!* reveal how the two sides have constructed the seals themselves to serve divergent ideologies. The pro-beach side

Jane, a volunteer docent at the site. As a spectator, she finds nature salutary, healthful, and revelatory, but she repudiates dominion over it—her ocean is wilderness as sublime.

Such feelings run highest when the discussion comes around to sharks. Sharks, including great whites, have always lived in the offshore canyon, and seals with bite marks are occasionally seen on local beaches. To the pro-beachers, the arrival of sharks on a more permanent basis would mean the victory of wilderness over Eden at the Children's Pool. Not surprisingly, in the only example of a film directly touching this controversy, *Jaws* receives repeated mention in these interviews on both sides. Pro-beachers see an Amity-esque situation in La Jolla as inevitable if the seals remain, while pro-seal advocates (again, not in my film) shrug off the *Jaws* myth and Flipperize the *sharks* by citing the decline in shark numbers worldwide. They welcome the sharks, in fact, as a sign of recovery. I felt *Jaws* deserved explicit mention by me as well: With the B-roll covering the interview with Paul and Charley, who saw a shark attack a seal at the beach neighboring the Children's Pool, I have attempted to recreate the tense feeling on the beach just before a young boy becomes the shark's second victim in *Jaws*. I have signaled this intent by book ending the montage with an actual shot from Spielberg's film (fat lady walking to the water's edge) and a similar one that I took on location (not-so-fat lady walking to the water's edge).

Though the terms of this debate emerge in the film, *Sealed Off!!!* is not just a string of position statements. My approach to the interview emphasizes documentary excess, both visual and verbal, in order to undermine the classic debate structure typical of the journalistic approach to controversy. Verbally, I include more information from my

characterizes the animals as invaders, employing rhetoric that echoes the perennial complaints of overdevelopment and immigration in California. “They’re introducing big-city stress to La Jolla, and it really bothers me,” Anne, a pro-beacher, opines. “They used to be perfectly happy on the rock,” complains Mrs. Revelle, another pro-beacher, referring to the seals’ former offshore haul-out spot. The proffered solution is subjugation. “I’d hate to see a child come along, pick up a seal turd and put it in their mouth,” says Pierce, likening seal feces to dog waste on the beach, though seals actually defecate in the water. Pierce also sees a danger that a seal could bite a child, like an unruly house-pet, though this has never happened. These comments, and others like them in my film, reveal an anxiety about the destruction of an Edenic place.

The pro-seal side reverses the valences of many of the same points. They Flipperize the seals, a tactic underpinned by the well-known presence of Sea World in San Diego, which stages a popular trained seal show (Davis 122-123). Seals, which are rebounding as a species worldwide, symbolize the global environmental crisis to those on this side. Pro-sealers even assert that seal defecation is *good* for the local environment (though this is not in my film), and that the animals are exhausted and vulnerable when they come out on the beach to rest, an unproved ethological theory. “To me it’s just mean to disturb them,” says Dorota, an activist from Poland, who sees the situation as akin to the degradation of Europe’s wildlife. Furthermore, pro-sealers argue, children do not need another beach, they need to see wildlife—and not just at Sea World. “When you look at a wild animal, you feel somehow connected to the whole cycle of nature,” says

subjects than is strictly necessary to frame the debate, demonstrating that no person is reducible to one rhetorical stance, and that no controversy is divisible into two neat positions. From Anne, the town council president of La Jolla (a fact I grudgingly omitted for time), we learn she is a Channel swimmer, and has a strong nostalgic streak for a bygone era before her birth; we hear about Otis's aversion to taxes and sense a messianic delusion ("I felt like Christ or something, I was being mocked"); and Pierce has a felony history for possession of marijuana. Rather than condemning these pro-beachers, their excess renders them sympathetic. On the other side, the pro-seal people come across perhaps less sympathetically, even odd. What kind of person, the film asks, would sit on a beach all night to watch seals (Michael), stick cameras in the faces of ordinary visitors (Bryan), or recite a poem in a public hearing (Andrea, in the credit sequence)? These are not quite the familiar conservation heroes and villains of most controversy films, such as those of Hardy Jones and Rob Stewart. Rather than focusing on the debate, the viewer's sympathies, I hope, select out the memorable and engaging people involved as the question of pro or con recedes in significance.

To underline this approach visually, I eschew setups such as the "three-button" composition and narrow depth of field that standardize interviews and lend (I think) undue authority. Instead I position the camera at an uncommon distance, preserving considerable space around my subjects, and I leave the backgrounds in focus, revealing the subjects' immediate local context. Though most subjects assumed I would want to talk to them at the Children's Pool, I asked instead to shoot at their homes, their offices, and their local hangouts. I mean for the viewer to read my interview compositions for

their bearing upon the arguments at hand. Sometimes, the objects in view seem irrelevant—an oversized plant, an enormous wooden cog, a ceramic vase in the shape of a redbird nest, for instance—while others, such as a killer whale paraphernalia, a sun-brushed surfboard, a de Kooning nude, have some vague bearing. The visual excess, however, represents the fabric of La Jolla, a social matrix of which my film is a portrait, and which increasingly seems to overwhelm the debate rhetoric.

I derive this approach from the early work of Errol Morris, especially *Gates of Heaven* (1978), a monument of documentary excess which demonstrates Nichols' assertion that "excess in one system can quickly become meaning in another" (142). Morris's film is about the pet burial business in Southern California in the 1970s. The full import of the film lies less the narrative—which follows the relocation of some 300 pets from one cemetery to another—than in the excess. Opinions, even whole personalities, seem to emerge from a matrix of place.

My aim in *Sealed Off!!!* has been to deconstruct this controversy. The seals themselves, who in this encounter between humans and the ocean represent the ocean, and ultimately the natural world, reflect my point of view. I buffer my interview segments with footage of seals at the beach, usually engaging in suggestively human behavior. It becomes clear that the seals do not lack consciousness, though they lack speech. My film gives them no voice as such, only a presence, and beside the bickering humans in the film, I mean them to seem better off with out it. A passage from Verne's 20,000 Leagues, in which Aronnax describes seals at the South Pole, describes a scene similar to those of the seals in my film:

In resting on the earth they take the most graceful attitudes. Thus the ancients, observing their soft and expressive looks, which cannot be surpassed by the most beautiful look a woman can give, their clear voluptuous eyes, their charming positions, and the poetry of their manners, metamorphosed them, the male into a triton and the female into a mermaid. (340)

Unlike Verne, I choose not to metamorphose these seals into something out of an Edenic vision—or for that matter, out of a nightmare of wilderness. Often, the seals in my footage seem to look into the camera, sizing up the one-eyed creature staring back (the camera) across Berger's "narrow abyss of comprehension." This abyss is the one my film acknowledges, but does not cross.

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