Looking through the Beast’s Eyes?:
The Dialectics of Seeing the Monster and Being Seen by the Monster in Shark Horror Movies

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ABSTRACT
In his seminal essay “Why Look at Animals?” (1977), the late John Berger argued that the visual relationship between humans and other animals is a one-way street: humans look, whereas animals are observed. However, in one of the most iconic opening scenes in (horror) film history, viewers are invited to share an animal’s look: To the sound of alternating Es and Fs, “we” look through a great white shark’s eyes, as she (presumably) scours the ocean for food. But to what extent do “we” look through the animal’s eyes? To what degree does this point of view merely pretend to be an animal’s, although it is clearly anthropocentric, caught in a human-made technological apparatus which, in fact, controls the (representation of the) animal? This article discusses three shark horror movies in an attempt to offer (partial) answers to the questions raised above. Of course, the shark’s POV framed by, and filtered through, the cinematic apparatus can neither tell us what being a shark feels like, nor help us humans understand the animal. However, I will suggest that by acknowledging that animals are outside of human logic and understanding, these movies provide room for critical reflection.

Animal horror movies tap into the reservoir of affects and emotions related to animals.

In her seminal book Men, Women, and Chain Saws (1992), Carol J. Clover concludes that every good horror movie centres “on problems of vision—seeing too little (to the point of blindness) or seeing too much (to the point of insanity).” As a result, the horror genre’s “scary project is to tease, confuse, block, and threaten the spectator’s own vision” (166). Indeed, if you were asked to list five aesthetic conventions of horror movies, chances are that one of the features you would mention (provided you have seen a fair share of horror movies) is the interplay between light and darkness, while another is the killer’s point of view. The former strategy serves to confuse and surprise the audience. The monster often lurks in the shadows, hides underground, or exploits the dark veil of the night—“unseen to us until it emerges to shock and frighten” (Sipos 160). Symbolically, the monster’s crossing-over from the darkness into the light literalizes the poetics and aesthetics of transgression characteristic of the horror genre (Botting 1–13).

While scholars agree on the manifold meanings and diverse functions of lighting in audiovisual horror, the effects of using the killer’s point of view have caused much debate. Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on the objectification of the female body in visual culture, Jane Caputi has claimed that slasher films employ “a uniquely technical means … to encourage audience identification with the sex murderer: the point of view shot.” “Via camera style,” she continues, “all viewers are placed inside the perspective of the killer, seeing things … from his point of view” (84; italics in original). Robert Cumbow has thus accused Halloween (1978) of “mak[ing] killers … of us all,” as “the heavy breathing of Michael [Myers] becom[es] our own as we wonder what he/we will do next” (47). According to this line of argumentation, the diegetic killer inevitably embodies the audience’s
misogynism, acting out male viewers’ sadistic desires. Clover has drawn a more complex picture of the use of the first-person perspective.¹ She acknowledges that “[p]redatory gazing through the … the first-person camera” is a key component of horror cinema, but she emphasizes that “the eye of horror works both ways. It may penetrate, but it is also penetrated” (183; 191). As Steve Neale has observed, this oscillation also plays out in *Halloween*, as Michael Myers (Nick Castle) is both the subject of the gaze and the object of Laurie’s (Jamie Lee Curtis) look (with which viewers are repeatedly aligned), thereby making the audience’s identification constantly shift between the victimizer and the victim. Vera Dika has added that although the killer’s point of view allows the audience to “figuratively occupy… his position within the film’s space,” viewers “remain relatively free of an identification with that character’s psychology” (36). In fact, “visual alignment,” Mathias Clasen has more recently stressed, “does not entail moral alignment or even sympathetic identification” (loc. 2464). After all, “when a subjective shot is used, it generally signifies some type of negative vision” (Galloway 46). As such, the first-person perspective is more likely to alienate viewers from than bring them closer to the murderous character whose body they virtually occupy.

*Halloween’s* use of the first-person point of view has become iconic and set a template for how it would be used in the slasher movies of the 1980s—and in other horror sub-genres since. Notably, however, three years prior to *Halloween, Jaws* (1975) opened in a similar fashion.² For the purposes of this article, the main difference between the openings of the two motion pictures is related to the question of whose point of view the camera replicates. Whereas *Halloween* allows viewers to see the world through the eyes of a murderous child, in *Jaws*, they share the perspective of a great white shark. Feminist film scholars have ignored this disparity, which becomes particularly prevalent in discussions of the slaying of Chrissie Watkins (Susan Backlinie) in the first few minutes of *Jaws*. For example, Peter Biskind has opined that the “shark, all too obviously, can only be the young man’s sexual passion, a greatly enlarged, marauding penis” (1). The resultant symbolic equation of shark and male desire supports John Berger’s point that “the essential relation between man and animal [is] metaphoric” (16). Indeed, in horror films, monstrous animals “first and foremost function as vehicles to conceptualize and understand the human” (Fuchs 183).

Randy Malamud has thus concluded that “representations of animals in visual culture are inherently biased and self-serving,” which is why “[i]t is difficult, if not impossible, to find in these human representations an objectively true account of who animals are” (loc. 232). Yet in addition to figuring as a “stand-in for humans” (DeMello 334), fictional representations of nonhuman animals inevitably also conjure up the actual animals they depict. After all, animal imagery, Jonathan Burt has suggested, appears “less mediated” than other elements in visual culture and is thus susceptible to drawing the viewers’ attention “beyond the image and … beyond the aesthetic and semiotic framework” (*Animals* 11–12).

¹ In his seminal study of the “Formal Permutations of the the Point-of-View Shot” (1975), Edward Branigan differentiates between “the classic POV shot—from the subject’s eyes” and shots “from behind the subject, usually over one shoulder” (and a few other shots; 59). Alexander Galloway has likewise stressed that subjective shots and point-of-view shots are not the same. In subjective shots, “the camera shows what the actual eyes of a character would see.” “POV shots,” on the other hand, “show approximately what a character would see. … In other words, the POV shot tends to hover abstractly in space at roughly the same location of a character. But the subjective shot very precisely positions itself inside the skull of that character” (41). Since POV shots still suggest subjectivity, I employ terms generally associated with video games (both in critical and journalistic/fan discourses)—first-person perspective for what Galloway and others refer to as “subjective” and third-person perspective for any subjective viewpoint that does not try to create the illusion of looking through a character’s eyes. For relatively recent explorations of the various means of mediating subjectivity in film (and other media), see chapters six and seven in Jan- Noël Thon’s *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (2016) and Benjamin Beil’s German study *First Person Perspectives: Point of View und figurenzentrierte Erzählformen im Film und im Computerspiel* (2010).

² Of course, neither film inaugurated the use of the point of view shot. For example, in Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Lodger* (1927), the audience witnesses a scene unfold through the eyes of a character believed to be the murderer.
Even though I have just tried to disentangle animal representations from humans in terms of their semantic potentials, any representation of a nonhuman animal is, of course, mediated and accordingly enmeshed in human discourses and framed by technologies. In terms of their functions within semiotic systems, animals may hence be likened to marginalized, oppressed, and/or otherwise exploited groups of people. Similar to women, who “are simultaneously looked at and displayed,” as Mulvey claimed (11), “animals are always the observed” (Berger 27). In a close reading of Berger’s influential essay “Why Look at Animals?” (1977), Burt concludes that one of the essay’s strengths is the underlying notion of “the look” functioning as “an active component in the establishment of relations and not simply a matter of passive seeing or straightforward objectification” (“Why” 207).

In this article, I explore this “active component” by examining the animal’s gaze, on the one hand, and the ways in which the animal body is framed and staged, on the other, in three shark horror movies: Jaws, Deep Blue Sea (1999), and Shark Night (2011). With more than three decades of technological progress between Jaws and Shark Night, the socio-cultural environment changed, the dominant cultural stance toward sharks transformed, and filmmaking evolved dramatically. Whereas Jaws combined live-action footage of actual sharks and mechanical sharks, Deep Blue Sea primarily used a mix of mechanical and digital sharks (with a handful of real-life shark scenes in-between), and Shark Night primarily employed digital effects, with animatronics used in specific scenes, with the only footage of real sharks appearing in the opening credits. As the animal’s body hence becomes increasingly enmeshed in technologies, the digital representations (or even simulations) of animals are “[n]o longer limited by the real animal” (Fudge 88).

Beyond exemplifying different ways in which horror movies depict animals, the three films represent particular approaches to imagining the shark’s point of view. Whereas Jaws and Shark Night employ unaltered first-person shots to evoke the shark’s vision, Deep Blue Sea’s first-person shark shots are visually marked to convey the idea that sharks do not perceive the world in the same ways as humans do. Of course, this change in perspective is also achieved through technology—and this will be my guiding point, for my discussion of these three movies will demonstrate how the technological apparatus frames and structures the animal’s body, its gaze, and viewers’ relation to the animal.

In contrast to the primarily psychoanalytically inflected studies on the first-person perspective mentioned above, my approach will draw on affect theory, film phenomenology, and cultural animal studies. Accordingly, I am less interested here in questions of identification than embodiment and movement. “Although a camera is not human, we … experience some aspect of a camera—its angle of view, position, or way of moving, its ‘attention’ to objects—in relation to a human trait,” Edward Branigan states in Projecting a Camera (37). In other words, the camera makes human embodiment possible. However, in the films examined here, some of the most interesting implications play out in moments when the camera cuts its ties from its human anchor and when it “take[s] us beyond our own abilities” (Barker 115). In these moments, the viewers’ connection to the camera becomes post-human.

**SHARKS AND SHARK VISION IN JAWS**

The opening of Jaws has become so iconic that it seems needless to describe the scene: the Universal logo slowly appears, accompanied by indistinct sounds. The logo fades to black as the sounds continue. The opening credits begin to roll, and the sounds are increasingly drowned by what will become the sonic signifier of the shark’s presence: the simple, yet extremely effective, two-tone shark theme. When the camera begins to take the audience on an underwater ride, four capital letters appear on the screen: “JAWS.” As the camera-slash-shark moves along, the music’s pace steadily increases, building suspense. A sudden cut disrupts this build-up of suspense and transports the audience from the first-person underwater perspective to an objective vantage point panning across a group of teenagers partying at the beach. After a few seconds, the camera focuses on Chrissie and Tom (Jonathan Filley), who leave the rest of the group. Chrissie plunges
into the water while Tom protests, “I can swim! I just can’t walk… or undress myself.” Chrissie asks Tom to “[c]ome in the water,” but he drops to the sand and passes out. The perspective shifts to an underwater point of view, looking up at the naked body swimming in the dark (Fig. 1), accompanied by paradoxically foreboding yet simultaneously upbeat music. After a brief shift to a close-up of Chrissie above the water (Fig. 2), the ominous music from the movie’s opening moments suddenly resurfaces, indicating that someone or something is lurking beneath Chrissie, gazing at her naked figure. The camera moves closer and closer toward her nude body (Figs. 3–6), as the music’s pace subtly but steadily increases until the unknown creature strikes. Chrissie’s ensuing forty-five-second struggle for her life is primarily shot from a Steadicam, suggesting objectivity and distance—even though the camera is rather close to the action (Fig. 7).

The animal’s first-person perspective, Katarina Gregersdotter and Nicklas Hällén have argued, “utilises the audience’s ability and (un)conscious attempts to make sense of and interpret what is shown on screen to represent the animal’s consciousness” (216). In this way, the “anthropomorphisation of the animal facilitates and is necessary for the representation of the animal as antagonist in the struggle between animal and human” (Gregersdotter and Hällén 209). Although this argument is convincing, I would like to suggest that the “shark POV” employed in Jaws engages viewers corporeally and endows the nonhuman with agency.

As early as 1953, Julio L. Moreno noted that first-person shots create the illusion of “an actual experience presented without mediation” (344). The (virtual) first-hand, (dis)embodied experience, he continued, nullifies the “possibility of … narrative” (356). Bruce Kawin has explained that “there is a natural association between first-person discourse and first-person experience” (39). However, this link only applies to verbal discourse, for when [the] subjective camera adopts the position of a character’s eyes and offers that as an equivalent to first-person discourse, the analogy is forced, for although visual experience is as appropriate to film expression as verbal expression is to writing, the eyes are passive organs of reception, not of expression, and it is not natural to tell by seeing. (39; italics in original)

Kawin downplays vision as a passive means of decoding ocular perception here. In particular, he ignores the difference between looking and seeing in this passage. In the context of the visual relations between animals and humans, Garry Marvin has aptly noted that “[t]o see an animal suggests that the viewer is doing little more than registering the fact that the animal is present and visible” (4). The verb “look,” on the other hand, implies that the animal becomes the “focus of attention, with ‘at’ indicating a visual movement toward it” (5). This movement is a key element in Jaws, as well. In the scenes featuring the shark’s first-person point of view, the animal does not “just” see and register human bodies in the water. Rather, the fish can see them, then turns its visual attention to them, and then moves toward the bathers. Crucially, David Lulka suggests that movement “is perhaps the most illustrative and ubiquitous manifestation of agency”(87).
As such, the shark’s motion signifies agency, as the animal moves her entire body toward human beings with an apparent intention: to prey upon the swimmers. In the diegetic world, the shark’s actions are thus “performed by” the animal “rather than happening to” it (Crist 40). Moreover, the shark does not just randomly kill anyone, as the Kintner death scene suggests. She does not simply attack the first potential victim she encounters, but rather consciously chooses one. As such, the shark “choose[s] to act in one way rather another because [she] want[s] to”—ideas connected to the expression of agency (McFarland and Hediger 5; italics in original).

But this implicit acknowledgment of the shark’s agency communicates yet another idea. When the movie presents the shark’s point of view, the camera captures the shark’s movement through space in the present moment, a movement directed toward the human body on the verge of becoming-food. Importantly, the mere movement of the shark does not constitute a narrative. By circumventing “the detour and boredom of conveying a story,” identification is replaced by affect, which “is transmitted directly” (Deleuze 36). The affective response of horror experienced by the viewer transports the connection between the shark and the on-screen human from the diegetic world into the phenomenological real by inscribing the animal into the human (and vice versa) through the mediator of the cinematic apparatus.

This aspect becomes particularly pertinent during the initial attack, which generates corporeal responses in viewers through “kinetic editing” (Keil and Whissel 5). As the film’s editor, Verna Fields, remarked, “What is most important is not to lose the emotional impact. If clouds don’t match or the water isn’t exactly the same color, people won’t notice if you keep the rhythm. In a film like Jaws where people are caught up in the suspense we were able to get by with a lot” (qtd. in Wright 113). Indeed, the “impact aesthetics” (King 91–116) of the attack overwhelms viewers somatically and leaves no room for reflection. When the shark looks and acts, audiences do not watch “in an active controlling sense” (Mulvey 9); instead, the audiovisual package attacks viewers by utilizing “the visceral immediacy of cinematic...
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experience” (Shaviro 36), making viewers feel the physical power and agency of the shark. To be sure, the shark per se was never present, yet her virtual presence leaves its mark on the viewers and effects “the irreversible alienation of the viewer” (46) by inscribing the nonhuman into the human. The first-person perspective in *Jaws* accordingly alienates viewers but simultaneously brings them closer to the beast, framed and structured by the technological apparatus.

To return to the feminist readings of the scene, if the opening attack has an erotic dimension, the interpretation as a re-enactment of male sadistic urges on the passive female body oversimplifies matters, since the scene’s erotic charge implicates human and nonhuman elements alike. After all, the affects generated by motion pictures “involve[] human participations with inhuman entities—animals, machines, anything that does not reflect or affirm the dominance of the human” (MacCormack 21). This nonhuman-ness of the shark and the camera attracts viewers, as it allows them to imagine scenarios they cannot perform in their human bodies. The nonhuman assemblage hence opens up yet-unknown experiences and yet-untapped sensations “through an act of estrangement,” which expects viewers to “‘play along’ with a world that operates differently” (Bukatman 14).

In addition, the first-person perspective, combined with the camera’s inability to capture the shark for a long period of time, enhances the fish’s effective invisibility. In the minutes leading up to the shark’s second kill, Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) and his family, along with friends and hundreds of vacationers and islanders, are at the beach. After introducing Alex Kintner (Jeffrey Voorhees), the camera focuses on Brody, sitting in a folding chair, anxiously staring at the water and expecting the shark to strike any moment. Yet, people are swimming, playing with their dogs, doing the things people do at the beach. When the camera assumes Brody’s point of view, his line of sight is constantly blocked. As one of Brody’s acquaintances literally gets in his face, the subtext concerning vision comes to the visual foreground, as the man occupies about half the frame when a young woman starts screaming in the water (Fig. 8). Brody fears it may be a shark attack, but a young man is merely touching her beneath the water’s surface. Seconds later, a group of children goes into the water. Another man approaches Brody and distracts him, a distraction again highlighted by the man’s dominance of the frame (Fig. 9). The ominous music sounds as the perspective switches to a first-person point of view beneath the ocean’s surface, manoeuvring between the children’s legs. The “shark cam” closes in on Alex, who is swimming on an inflatable mattress, some feet from the other kids. When the shark strikes, the camera switches to a third-person perspective. Cut to the beach, where people are rising to their feet, wondering, “Did you see this?” The camera zooms in on Brody’s face and then returns to the children in the water, now surrounded by blood—panic breaks out.

The question “Did you see this?” verbally draws attention to the topic of sight and vision played out in this scene. Although Brody wants to keep a close eye on the water, other characters constantly obstruct his line of vision, and when the shark attacks Alex, Ellen tries to relax her husband by massaging his shoulders, further distracting him (not that he could have done anything). In addition, visual proof of the shark’s presence is, in fact, sparse, if not altogether lacking. The man wondering, “Did you see this?” highlights the audience’s (and the
beachgoers’) inability to, in fact, see the culprit (Fig. 10). What the audience (and, to a lesser degree, the people at the beach) can see is Alex gulping water and his own blood while screaming in pain before being dragged underwater. Even if a shark attack is the “logical” conclusion, the audience cannot see the animal—it escapes human sight. The shark remains practically invisible even if viewers share its point of view.

**SHARKS AND SHARK VISION IN DEEP BLUE SEA**

Produced nearly a quarter-century after *Jaws*, *Deep Blue Sea’s* approach to sharks is in many respects the polar opposite of *Jaws*. As director Renny Harlin stresses in a behind-the-scenes feature included in the Blu-ray, “My whole approach to this movie was no more hiding sharks. This time you’re really gonna see them.” As he adds, “You can look at it swimming, circling around, coming to you, biting you.” These soundbites testify to Harlin’s focus on the visual presence of the sharks—an idea he could realize thanks to the radical advancements in digital technology in the 1990s. Whereas Spielberg’s team struggled with a relatively low budget and the mechanical model of a shark, *Deep Blue Sea’s* creators had the benefit of technologies that allowed them to insert digital sharks whenever needed. However, Harlin’s direct address of the audience (“biting you”) implies a level of immediacy that the movie, in fact, undermines through its visual language.

*Deep Blue Sea* follows the template of a mad scientist tale garnished with a critique of capitalism. Russell Franklin (Samuel L. Jackson) finances a research project with the aim of obtaining a cure for Alzheimer’s disease from the brain tissue of sharks. Since “[t]heir brains aren’t large enough to harvest sufficient amounts of the protein complex,” the project’s directors—more interested in the end result than the implications of their measures—decide to genetically manipulate the sharks in order to increase their brain size. However, the process ultimately increases not only their brain size (and intellectual
capacity), but also their body size. When Franklin visits the facility, a thunderstorm hits the research station, and chaos ensues, as the three sharks kill eight people within a few hours before three of the humans succeed in stopping the sharks from escaping into the open water.

In the opening scene, a sailboat floats in the open water. After a brief bird eye’s view onto the ship, the audience is taken to an underwater perspective that peeks upward at the boat (Fig. 12). A cut transports viewers to the action aboard the ship, where a man and a woman are making out. Another cut to below the surface, but this time, the point of view is different. The camera assumes a first-person perspective, as the camera movement suggests that something manoeuvres through the water. The point of view is clearly nonhuman, as a fisheye lens-like filter adds the illusion of different levels of focus, with a round area in the middle of the screen functioning as a kind of crosshairs (Fig. 13). A few moments later, a gigantic mako shark breaks through the hull and all four people stumble into the water. As the shark closes in on its potential prey (seen from the shark’s perspective), it is surprisingly hit by a harpoon and consequently guided back to the research station.

Although there are some similarities in terms of how Deep Blue Sea and Jaws represent the shark’s active and agential engagement with the human (reduced to a source of protein), in other ways, there are clear differences between the two films. In particular, the sheer visual omnipresence of Deep Blue Sea’s sharks ensures that they occupy the centre of visual attention. At the same time, however, actual sharks are entirely absent from the story and were absent from the film’s production. This non-presence of sharks draws attention to the spectral and simulacral character of the creatures encountered through the cinematic apparatus. In the making-of, Harlin explains, “The footage of the live sharks will be cut together with scenes that will sometimes be …

The shark’s point of view is clearly marked in Deep Blue Sea, as the movie visually differentiates between third-person underwater shots and moments that are seen through one of the sharks’ eyes. Of course, any point of view shot in film re-frames and structures the subject’s perspective and its vision, as the cinematic image can only approximate—and not truly capture—a living being’s vision (humans included). However, differentiating between the shark’s and the human’s point of view underlines that these species do not perceive (let alone understand) the world in the same way. The visual emphasis on this “abyss of non-comprehension” (Berger 13) highlights the sharks’ difference from humans. Unlike humans, who are rational creatures, sharks, the movie suggests, are driven by the primal urge to feed—even if humans supercharge their cognitive abilities. Similar to Jaws, the shark’s urge to kill re-integrates humans into the “natural” food chain, as they find themselves in the uncomfortable position of no longer being the top dogs.

**Re-integrated into the “natural” food chain, humans find themselves in the uncomfortable position of no longer being the top dogs.**

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**Fig. 12** | Something is looking up at the boat. Screenshot from the Deep Blue Sea Blu-ray, 00:45. Warner Bros., 2010.

**Fig. 13** | Deep Blue Sea visually marks the shark’s POV. Screenshot from the Deep Blue Sea Blu-ray, 03:30. Warner Bros., 2010.
mechanical sharks, sometimes digitally generated sharks. Our goal is … to have a seamless story where you will never be able to tell whether you are dealing with real sharks or something that movie magic has created. We definitely put the actors into contact with the real sharks.” Special effects designer Walt Conti echoes the emphasis on the “real” contact with sharks, noting, “There are a lot of times the actors aren’t acting; they’re reacting. Having an 8,000-pound shark thrashing and throwing water at you—that’s not faking it; that’s like the real thing.” On the one hand, these remarks anchor the animals seen on the screen in material reality. On the other hand, however, the “8,000-pound shark” the actors and actresses were in direct contact with was not an actual shark, but a human-made and inanimate stand-in for a shark. In fact, both Harlin’s wording and Conti’s expression, “that’s like the real thing” (my emphasis), show an awareness of how this attention to authenticity is effectively for naught, as the question of “what is real and what is not” can no longer be satisfyingly answered.

Even twenty years ago, few viewers would have mistaken the sharks featured in Deep Blue Sea for actual sharks (Fig. 14). Indeed, the late Roger Ebert noted that “some of the sharks look like cartoons” (para. 8), while Dustin Putman commented that “the mechanical [sharks] are more plausible than the CGI ones” (para. 6). Accepting a clear-cut differentiation between what is believed to be real and what is considered artifice runs the danger of being overly simplistic, as “what is real isn’t so categorical” (Thompson 49). Jean Baudrillard suggested that the media-saturated postmodern world is characterized by “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Simulacra 1). Thus, real sharks are no longer at stake. Only their representations are, as real sharks have, in fact, been absorbed by their representations, and representations of sharks only refer to other representations to the point that the “original” has ceased to exist.

Hence, it seems appropriate that Deep Blue Sea’s sharks are not “simply” representations. They were largely generated by a computer, made of code, created by a seemingly simple sequence of 0s and 1s that took a representation of a shark as its model—signs (the digital sharks) made up of signs (the code) made up of
signs (representations of sharks). The “animals” viewers encounter through the cinematic apparatus are thus so far removed from material reality (and, indeed, have come to replace physical reality) that any discussion of the animal as animal “is to retreat into some kind of hinterland of philosophy that is always already false” (Fudge 59–60). In this hyperreal environment, digital animals such as *Deep Blue Sea’s* sharks “are excessive forces of nature” (Whissel 96). I appropriate Kirsten Whissel’s phrase here, meaning it to convey two ideas. First, the digital sharks are both physically and cognitively superior to their referents in nature. Second, the digital sharks epitomize the perceived “excess” of animal life on our planet, which increasingly reaches its limits. The concomitant second life of nature in computer databases and people’s minds has resulted in its usurpation by its (digital) representations, an idea that *Deep Blue Sea* hammers home by featuring genetically modified sharks as the film’s monsters.

The film’s submersion in intertextuality and self-awareness both highlights and reinforces this process. Indeed, not only does the movie irreverently incorporate the *Jaws* movies into its voracious textual body, but its characters liken their fates to movies so excessively that they seem aware of their existence as pieces of fiction, thereby creating a hyperreality in which the differences between fiction and (diegetic) reality disappear. This notion of being a creative product of humans—a character—becomes manifest in the visually marked shots representing the shark’s point of view. Whereas, on one level, the deviation from traditional point-of-view shots serves to alienate viewers from the subject whose point of view they share, on another level, it highlights how the sharks are imbricated in the technological apparatus. In this respect, they are not so different from the human beings encountered in the diegetic world. Tellingly, the most meta-aware of the characters, the African-American cook Preacher (LL Cool J), concludes at one point that he is “done! Brothers never make it out of situations like this!” As Preacher comes to see his life as a re-enactment of a standard horror movie plot, his words make explicit how various processes in the diegetic reality “substitut[e] the signs of the real for the real, … deterring every real process via its operational double” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 2).

These developments lead to an “excess of reality,” which creates “an artificial world that expels [human beings] from it” (Baudrillard, “On Disappearance” 25).

Yet this expulsion from the world and attendant banishment into the world of signs concerns human beings and other animals alike. The resulting ontological nebulosity surrounding *Deep Blue Sea’s* sharks has, however, yet another effect. The movie’s sharks were, quite literally, animated by digital technologies. Because of their animated character, digital monsters “exist[] in a dialectical relationship with death,” for “they seem most lifelike when their deadliness and mortality are on display” (Whissel 99). Whereas Whissel primarily discusses digital monsters as an example of “a cinematic visual effect that operates as a site of intense signification and gives stunning (and sometimes) allegorical expression to a film’s key themes, anxieties, and conceptual obsessions” (6), the mortality she diagnoses evokes ideas surrounding animals’ disappearance from material reality. In particular, Akira Mizuta Lippit has suggested that animals have “found a proper habitat … in the recording devices of the technological media,” which “allowed modern culture to preserve animals” (25). Visually marking the shark’s point of view thus functions as a reminder of how the animal (and its implied agency) is a mere specter. And even though the explicit differentiation between the human and animal perspectives in *Deep Blue Sea* may have been intended to highlight the animal other “as an unknowable other” (Lippit 6), it opens up another potential meaning. Animals’ “instinctive, almost telepathic communication,” Lippit has argued, “put[s] into question the primacy of human language and consciousness as optimal modes of communication” (2). But if this subversive potential is contained within the man-made technological apparatus, its potency is, likewise, harnessed.

**SHARKS AND SHARK VISION IN SHARK NIGHT**

Produced a decade after *Deep Blue Sea* and featuring shark special effects by Walt Conti, the same man who was responsible for the effects in the 1999 movie, *Shark Night* follows a group of Tulane undergrads who are
about to spend a weekend at a vacation home by a lake somewhere in Louisiana. According to the generic script, different shark species kill off the college students one by one, with the final girl and her potential mate (and her dog) surviving.

_Shark Night_ draws on animal horror’s convention of sealing off the artificial world of humans from the natural environment inhabited by animals by emphasizing the ways in which human beings intervene in natural processes. The lake, as one of the characters remarks, “is a saltwater lake,” which “means it’s not impossible” for a shark to live there. Another character adds that a shark may have “c[o]me out of the Gulf, flooded up over the interstate, wound up here, got comfortable, and made a home.” However, neither nature’s design nor pure chance led the sharks into the lake. Rather, a group of men living by the lake concluded that since Shark Week has been such a phenomenal success, there is a market niche not served by the current offerings: people who “wanna watch the real hardcore shit you can’t get on basic cable.” Thus, whereas the movie at first hints at a “natural” cause that might have led the sharks into human habitat, making the animals the aggressors who transgressed the borderline between nonhuman and human worlds, it was human beings who intervened in nature. In this way, _Shark Night_ “rel[ies] on and simultaneously subvert[s] and re-inscribe[s] the basic conceptual separation of the human and non-human animal” (Gregersdotter, Hållén, and Höglund 5).

This intervention in nature becomes closely interconnected with the sharks’ first-person perspective in the movie. _Shark Night_ lures viewers into thinking that specific underwater shots depict the sharks’ points of view (Fig. 15). However, as the narrative unfolds, the audience comes to understand that in order to film “the real hardcore shit,” the rednecks mounted

**The sheer visual omnipotence of Deep Blue Sea’s sharks draws attention to the spectral and simulacral character of the creatures encountered through the cinematic apparatus.**
cameras on the sharks (Fig. 16). As Donna Haraway has remarked, such a connection between technology and the animal’s body has far-reaching implications: “The camera is both physical ‘high technology’ and immaterial channel to the interior reaches of another. Through the camera’s eye glued, literally, to the body of the other, we are promised the full sensory experience of the critters themselves, without the curse of having to remain human” (252). Thus, the camera violently used as an extension of the animal’s body promises “[i]mmediate experience of otherness, inhabitation of the other as a new self, sensation and truth in one package without the pollution of interfering or interacting” (Haraway 252). However, rather than attempting to mediate the sharks’ experiences, Shark Night’s subjective shots function as a vehicle to create spectacle. As a result, the technology the characters employ in order to show the shark’s point of view does not fulfill its promise. The camera attached to the shark’s body cannot show, let alone tell, viewers what being a shark entails.

Still, the scenario played out in Shark Night allows viewers to understand the complex interrelations between technology and the depiction of the animal’s body. Significantly, these technological infoldings of the flesh concern animal and human alike. When viewers are first introduced to the main male characters, they are playing a multiplayer round of Halo: Reach (2010). Before the camera focuses on the characters that will be of significance to the rest of the story, viewers can see the mere virtual presences of unimportant tertiary characters on monitors adjacent to the screen the video game is played on (Fig. 17). The configuration of the image, dominated by screens displaying digital and digitized content and the virtual presences of other human beings constantly surveyed by digital technologies, highlights not only the interconnections of the material body and its virtual doubles, but also the omnipresence of cameras and other technologies observing our everyday actions.

In an article on the transmedia documentary Bear 71 (2012), Anat Pick concludes that the combination of subjective shots and the interactional dimension offered by the website “bind human and nonhuman in an age of mass surveillance” (para. 44). Even without the affordances of new media, Shark Night accomplishes a similar feat, as the movie’s point-of-view shots demolish the wall separating humans from animals. However, the horror film does not facilitate identification with the animal, nor imagine what being a shark would feel like; rather, Shark Night’s way of bringing humans closer to animals is by highlighting the ways in which humans and animals alike are constantly under surveillance in the early twenty-first century. But the movie presents another likeness between the two species: mankind’s out-of-control use of technology becomes akin to the shark’s need for nourishment. While Deep Blue Sea...
narrates a classic “technology gone wrong”-tale, in *Shark Night*, technology is controlled and deliberately used by human beings to prey on others—human and nonhuman animals alike. However, nature—embodied by the sharks—eludes human control. On the one hand, *Shark Night* thus suggests that the human fantasy of controlling and subduing nature is precarious. On the other hand, by explicitly interweaving nature and technology, the movie points out that the control of technology is, likewise, a mere illusion. In the end, *Shark Night* illustrates mankind’s growing awareness that “the world we are making through our own choices and inventions is a world that neutralizes [any] meaningful link[s] between action and consequence” (Allenby and Sarewitz 64–65).

THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE IN SHARK HORROR

In one of the first scholarly discussions of animal horror movies, Elisa Aaltola suggests that

> [t]he monster lacks all personality and its motives are nonexistent. It becomes known only through its body and aggressive actions: it is constructed as an acting body. Otherwise it remains hidden, causing fear with its invisibility and absence. This goes well together with the idea that the animal is the opposite of humans—where as [sic] the humans in the films are intentional, rational and moral heroes[,] the animal remains an instinctually violent body that is unseen, unknown—and frightening.

(para. 2)

This lack of motive in combination with their apparent otherness from human beings has made anthropophagic sharks “unanthropomorphisable” (Quirke 6).

However, in the movies discussed in this essay, viewers share the shark’s point of view and thus, quite literally, get closer to the beast. The shark’s point of view actively explores its environment, always looking for the next piece of food. In this way, rather than “gazing reactively,” which is “figured as an experience of being bruised, scarred, terrified, made to faint, and stabbed to death,” (Clover 175) the animals in these movie look—and strike—back. They bring along terror and death. The shark is thus far from a passive object of representation. Indeed, “the animal has tended to disrupt the smooth unfolding of Enlightenment ideology. Defined as that bit of nature endowed with voluntary motion, the animal resists the imperialist desire to represent the natural … terrain … as a passive object or a blank slate ready for mapping by Western experts” (Armstrong 415).

Ironically, the challenge of human supremacy eventually always leads to the animal’s demise. However, the momentary uproars against human dominance prove significant. In her book on “narrating across species lines,” Susan McHugh suggests that “the success of the novel form follows … from its usefulness for experiments with multiple perspectives and processes that support models centered on agency rather than subjectivity, reflecting as well as influencing ongoing social changes” (1). Similarly, especially *Jaws* and *Deep Blue Sea* emphasize the shark’s experiential agency—they traverse the sea with a clear purpose. At the same time, however, *Jaws, Deep Blue Sea*, and *Shark Night* all demonstrate that the animal’s agency is to a large extent determined by the technological apparatus—and in this respect, these real, mechanical, and digital sharks are very much like us. In this way, these seemingly simplistic animal horror movies turn the “singular, indivisible line” humans have erected in order to celebrate their exceptionalist status on this planet into a “multiple and heterogeneous border” that cannot be maintained so easily (Derrida 399). ■
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