

“Anyway, We Delivered the Bomb”:
Dredging the Disaster of the USS Indianapolis
from History to Hollywood

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Abstract

“Anyway, we delivered the bomb” is an analysis of the significance of the inclusion of the critically acclaimed “Indianapolis speech” within Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*, whereby the shark hunter Quint delivers a chilling first-hand recollection of the disaster of the USS during the Second World War. As Quint tells it, after transporting components of the atomic bomb to the United States air base at Tinian Island, the USS Indianapolis was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine whilst on route to the island of Leyte, leaving Quint and his surviving shipmates to fend for themselves in shark-infested waters. Contextualizing the speech within the confidence crises and “disaster” film genre cycle of 1970s America, I shall analyze how *Jaws*’s representation of the Indianapolis disaster posits a direct challenge to the orthodox Hiroshima narrative (that the bombing was morally justifiable on the basis that it saved American lives) by foregrounding the suffering endured by the crew of the Indianapolis at the expense of delivering it, preying upon audience fears that an America reeling from the Watergate scandal and military defeat in Vietnam was now susceptible to moral – and nuclear – retribution for Hiroshima thirty years later.

Keywords: *Jaws*, Spielberg, New Hollywood, Second World War, Hiroshima, USS Indianapolis, atomic bomb, America, 1970s, Cold War

Steven Spielberg's revelation that the "Indianapolis speech" from his 1975 blockbuster *Jaws* – during which the shark hunter Quint (Robert Shaw) delivers a chilling first-hand account of the sinking of the USS Indianapolis during the Second World War – is his self-proclaimed "favorite scene from the film" (Bouzereau 114) represents the starting point for this article, given its comparatively brief cameo as a "virtual radio play in the most visual of movies" (Hoberman, "Ten Years" 218), with Nigel Andrews echoing this adulation in his proclamation that "*Jaws* without the Indianapolis speech would be like Hamlet without 'to be or not to be'" (Andrews 142). In retrospect, the director's reverence of this particular speech is none too surprising given his own personal infatuation with this specific era of American wartime history that is plentifully evidenced across his career body of work, in movies such as *1941* (1979), *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), *Always* (1989), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006):

I love that period. My father filled my head with war stories – he was a radioman on a B-25 fighting the Japanese in Burma. I have identified with that period of innocence and tremendous jeopardy all my life. It was the end of an era, the end of innocence, and I have been clinging to it for most of my adult life. (McBride 64)

Much less conspicuously – but standing first in line – is *Jaws*, with the inclusion of the Indianapolis speech – which was not a part of Peter Benchley's original bestselling 1974 novel – adding a new and significant historical context to the film's plot, and which is recited by Quint as follows:

Japanese submarine slammed two torpedoes into our side, chief. It was coming back, from the island of Tinian to Leyte, just delivered the bomb. The Hiroshima bomb. Eleven hundred men went into the water. Vessel went down in twelve minutes. Didn't see the first shark for about a half an hour. Tiger. Thirteen-footer. You know how you know that when you're in the water, chief? You tell by looking from the dorsal to the tail. What we didn't know, 'cause our bomb mission had been so secret, no distress signal had been sent. Huh. They didn't even list us overdue for a week. Very first light, chief. The sharks come cruising. So we formed ourselves into tight groups. You know it's . . . kinda like old squares in battle like a, you see on a calendar, like the Battle of Waterloo. And the idea was, the shark comes to the nearest man and that man, he'd start pounding and hollering and screaming and sometimes the shark would go away. Sometimes he wouldn't go away. Sometimes that shark, he looks right into you. Right into your eyes. You know the thing about a shark, he's got . . . lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eye. When he comes at ya, doesn't seem to be living. Until he bites ya and those black eyes roll over white. And then, ah then you hear that terrible high-pitch screaming and the ocean turns red and spite of all the pounding and the hollering they all come in and rip you to pieces. You know by the end of that first dawn, lost a hundred men! I don't know how many sharks, maybe a thousand! I don't know how many men, they averaged six an hour. On Thursday morning chief, I bumped into a friend of mine, Herbie Robinson from Cleveland. Baseball player, boson's mate. I thought he was asleep, reached over to wake him up. Bobbed up and down in the water, just like a kinda top. Up ended. Well . . . he'd been bitten in half below the waist. Noon the fifth day, Mr Hooper, a Lockheed Ventura saw us, he swung in low and he saw us. He's a young pilot, a lot younger than Mr Hooper, anyway he saw us and come in low. And three hours later a big fat PBY comes down and start to pick us up. You know that was the time I was most frightened? Waiting for my turn. I'll never put on a lifejacket again. So, eleven hundred men went in the water, three hundred and sixteen men come out, the sharks took the rest, June the 29th, 1945. Anyway, we delivered the bomb. (*Jaws* 01:29:30 – 01:33:04).

However, whilst critical acclaim for the speech has predominantly tended to focus around either the late Shaw's performance –

deemed “the greatest movie monologue ever” by *Jaws* blogger Tim Armitage (Armitage) – or its overall purpose within the film in terms of furnishing audiences with a deeper contextual understanding of Quint’s character – “To compensate for surviving the tragedy, he dedicates his life to destroying the creatures that killed his shipmates” (Friedman 167) –, recognition of the highly pivotal role it has played in the immortalization of the USS Indianapolis narrative within American – and global – popular culture and collective memory has, in contrast, sailed under the radar. Consequently, this has not only hindered a deeper understanding of the wider array of events surrounding this specific wartime naval tragedy, but also a further exploration of the multiple facets attached to it, with one of the most significant (given the current ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and the approaching 80th anniversary of the atomic age) concerning the complicated place that it occupies in relation to America’s atomic bombing of Hiroshima (a controversial topic considered taboo in Hollywood¹). Consequently, as I shall explore in this article, *Jaws* provides fertile ground for further reflections on the significances and implications associated with representing the Indianapolis disaster on the cinema screen, not merely in terms of how it constitutes a symbolic rite of passage which introduces this lesser-known naval disaster into mainstream American culture – cultivating an enduring interest in and respect for the ship and its crew in the process² – but how, as I shall argue in *Jaws*’s case, it directly challenges the moral foundations of America’s longstanding orthodox narrative on Hiroshima during a tumultuous spell of national introspection and reconfiguration in which the nation’s history, institutions, identity, and political class were subject to extensive debate, challenges, and revision amid the widespread fallout over the twin “disasters” of Watergate and Vietnam. As expected, such extensive internal social, political, and ideological transformations (or “revolutions”), which propelled American intellectual thought and culture into a new Postmodern era, were to have a profound influence upon the films produced by Hollywood during this period, none more so apparent than in those of the “disaster” genre, which underwent a

cyclical evolution amidst a revolutionary era of high-cost and high-tech filmmaking known as the “New Hollywood” (Schatz 17).

“The Secret Sufferers”: “The Historical”
Disaster Film, the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima, and
the Sinking of the USS Indianapolis.

Conducting extensive historical and structural analysis of the disaster genre in cinema, Maurice Yacowar has loosely defined “historical” disaster films as being structured around a conceptual core of “a situation of normalcy that erupts into a persuasive image of death” (313), which comprises eight different genre sub-categories: natural attack, the ship of fools, the city fails, the monster, survival, war, the historical and the comic (313-320).

Taking into consideration this chapter’s focus on the representation of the wartime disaster of the USS Indianapolis in *Jaws*, “The Historical” sub-category hereinafter becomes one of particular pertinence, especially given how films which fall under this sub-category, according to Yacowar, “characteristically depend upon the audience’s sense of contemporaneity, but . . . belong by the power and centrality of their doom imagery” (318), with such visual tropes being notably apparent across a multitude of early to mid-1970s disaster films (*Airport* (George Seaton, 1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974), *Earthquake* (Mark Robinson, 1974), and *The Hindenburg* (Robert Wise, 1975)). In these films, the basic underlying principle of hubris meeting nemesis, embedded within their focus upon moral, social, and technological shortcomings within human structures, finds ample manifestation in the maritime disaster of the USS Indianapolis, with several Yacowar’s other sub-categorizations reinforcing this link. To cite a few examples, the sharks enactment of a mass feeding frenzy upon the ship’s castaway crew is indicative of how representatives of the natural world can don the role of the antagonist in the “Natural Attack” type (which “dramatizes people’s helplessness against the forces of nature” (Yacowar 314)), the ship’s ill-fated lone voyage abroad in the Philippine Sea is akin to the “The Ship of Fools” label which

deals with the perilous “dangers of an isolated journey” (Yacowar 315), and – in hindsight of the significant scientific, technological, and socio-historical consequences associated with the ship’s “secret” atomic rendezvous – “the advances of civilization are found to be fragile and dangerous” in “The City Fails” (Yacowar 315). However, whilst representations of disaster in the cycle of films aforementioned, such as the burning Glass Tower in *The Towering Inferno* for example, are characteristic of the sort of big-budget and special effects laden spectacle that paved the way for the “high-concept” (Wyatt 13) blockbuster films of the latter half of the decade (*King Kong* (John Guillermin, 1976), *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977), and *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977)), *Jaws* stands aloof from such industrial trends in its gravitation towards what Michel Chion calls “textual speech” – which “is able to make visible in the images that it evokes through sound” (72) – in its portrayal of the Indianapolis disaster, with the earlier cited accolades of Quint’s speech signifying how such an unconventional reversion had, and continues to have, a significantly lasting impact upon the film’s viewers both then and now, with Spielberg’s predominant fixation on Quint as he delivers his harrowing soliloquy effectively maintaining the scene’s tension and keeping the viewer (and the transfixed onlooking duo of Chief Brody (Roy Scheider) and Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss)) trapped uncomfortably within the confines of the frame and forcing them to essentially relive this disaster in their own mind’s eye.

Quint’s graphic description of Herbie Robinson’s grizzly fate (“thought he was asleep, reached over to wake him up . . . he’d been bitten in half below the waist”) vividly illustrates what I deem as one of the speech’s most significant aspects: the addition of American casualties to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Historically, throughout the post-war decades, the Truman administration’s decision to deploy the bomb against Japan has been morally construed around the official narrative – established in 1947 by Truman’s Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson in response to emerging condemnations of the bombing in the immediate post-war period³ – that it was necessary in order to

hasten the end of the Second World War and save American lives that would otherwise have been unnecessarily lost in a full-scale military invasion of the Japanese homeland. As Stimson explained:

We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone. (40)

In foregrounding the physical and psychological suffering endured by the crew of the *Indianapolis* at the expense of delivering the bomb, *Jaws* therefore posits a direct cine-revisionist challenge to the official Stimson narrative on Hiroshima, empowering its viewers – at least those familiar with this period of the nation’s wartime history – to “reflect on some of the most vexing, confusing aspects of the ‘Good War’” (Wogan). It is on this point that Quint’s encounter with Herbie Robinson’s mangled corpse is imbued with an even greater allegorical significance, fundamentally serving as a microcosmic exposé of the “obverse of the sunny side” (Quirke 112). On the surface, the baseball players’ tranquil state represents an American nation sleeping peacefully and contently in the knowledge of the bomb’s successful deployment (a metaphorical “home run”), yet, hidden below it, lie, in the murky depths, the grim realities of the sacrifices made by Americans serving aboard the *Indianapolis* in order for this monumental event to occur. The film’s synchronous revelation and empathetic lamentation of the “secret sufferers”⁴ of Hiroshima then finds adequate expression in the eerie cry of the whale which hauntingly pierces the sombre silence in the wake of Quint’s speech (*Jaws* 1:33:09 – 1:33:21) and startles the shellshocked Brody, who, during this scene, serves as a stand in for those *Jaws* viewers (myself included) who – up until that point – were ignorantly unaware of this wartime disaster’s existence or authenticity,⁵ reifying what is a fragile moment of transition in the nation’s post-Second World War historical consciousness from a lived, personal memory – of a surviving crewmember of the USS *Indianapolis* – to a collectively

manufactured one and reaffirming the role of generational identity in the symbolic memory culture of the USS Indianapolis. As a result, the speech leaves one to ponder an uncomfortably introspective question about America's atomic legacy that inspires deeper critical reflection of the nation's "Good War" bureaucracy and the bombing's victimization not only of the Japanese but Americans themselves. If, as Stimson claimed, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was morally justifiable on the basis that it saved lives, then do the numerous deaths of the USS Indianapolis crew responsible for transporting the atomic bomb not render such a justificatory argument void?

In questioning the immoral sacrifice of American servicemen abroad, *Jaws* henceforth mirrors what had become a pervasive crisis of confidence in America by the mid-1970s which had, in turn, nurtured a "deeper, more thorough suspicion of the instruments of public life and a more profound disillusionment with the corruption and inefficiency of public institutions" (Schulman xv). Such a crisis was largely exacerbated by two significant "social earthquakes" (Slocum-Schaffer 211): the first was President Richard Nixon's resignation following the Watergate Scandal in 1974, and secondly, the hasty, and less than dignified, retreat from the Vietnam War following the fall of Saigon to communist forces in 1975. Positioned within this historical context, *Jaws* thereby constitutes a "modification of the current disaster cycle that had its real-world equivalents in Vietnam and Watergate" (Hoberman, "Nashville contra Jaws" 35), representing, along with Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), two key films produced in the shadows of these twin debacles that were either implicitly or explicitly critical of an American nation seemingly in a worrisome state of decline, disarray, and deviance, expressing "a fear of powerlessness or loss of control, an equation that was widely recognized at the time" (Cook 251) by audiences. Set against this backdrop of rampant pessimism, distrust, and unease, I would argue that the dissident challenge posed to the official Hiroshima narrative by *Jaws* is emblematic of the key issues of morality, social responsibility, and cultural identity and memory surrounding the atomic bombing – whose 30th anniversary coincidentally occurred

during the same year in which the film was released – that were widely and vigorously articulated amidst the revisionist and post-revisionist historiographical debates of the 1960s and early 1970s that redirected the focus of questions being asked by atomic scholars about the bomb.

One of the most compelling assertions put forth during this period was by Gar Alperovitz in *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965) who argued that policymakers in Washington primarily utilized the bomb as a political “bargaining chip” in order to establish diplomatic leverage over the Soviet Union in a new Cold War era,⁶ a conceptual position which post-revisionist scholars later merged together with Stimson’s orthodox position in their formulation of a viable consensus on the atomic issue: “there were no moral, military, diplomatic, or bureaucratic considerations that carried enough weight to deter dropping the bomb and gaining its projected military and diplomatic benefits” (Walker 111). For many, Truman had chosen a necessary evil in the atomic bomb, prompting the question: “Was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima really necessary?.” Such a rational inquisition subsequently highlights the inextricable correlation shared between Hiroshima’s 30th anniversary memorialization and the precipitous decline in faith that Americans had in their nation, institutions, and leaders post-Watergate and Vietnam. Moreover, this collective sense of growing malaise gave rise to a festering national guilt for Hiroshima and a heightened societal paranoia that an enfeebled America had now deteriorated into an increasingly susceptible target for moral – and nuclear – retribution from its growing Cold War adversaries – the most prominent being the Soviet Union which had already so nearly instigated a nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. As William Shannon bemoaned:

Our feelings of guilt are now tintured with dread. We have come to realize that we cannot keep the terrifying secret for ourselves alone, that others possess it, and that mortal enemies work night and day to refine nuclear weapons for possible use. Our dread is that Hiroshima’s fate may become our own. (159)

On this account, acting as more than just a mere revelation to the audience about Quint's character, the Indianapolis speech thereby furnishes *Jaws* with the capability to prey upon these "distinctive anxieties associated with the end of the Vietnam era" (Torry 32) by grounding the Indianapolis disaster within this anxious period of collapsing national confidence and prestige, opening up new and deeper avenues of interpretation as to how the monstrous great white shark terrorizing Amity in the film may thus be perceived as the great locus of this collective angst.

"History Bites Back": Quint's Indianapolis Speech,
the "Revenge of Nature," and the Scars of the Second
World War

As Spielberg and screenwriter Carl Gottlieb have frequently elaborated across oceans of behind-the-scenes material,⁷ three different people were responsible for authoring the speech: the first was playwright Howard Sackler, "whose research discovered the USS Indianapolis incident and introduced it into a version of the script" (Jankiewicz 13), the second was writer and director John Milius, who fleshed Sackler's initial draft out further, and the third was Robert Shaw himself, who administered his accomplished skills as a playwright (*The Caretaker* (1962), *The Physicists* (1964), *The Man in the Glass Booth* (1968), *Gantry* (1970), *Old Times* (1971), and *The Dance of Death* (1974)) to deliver the coup des gr ce to Milius's version. With this in mind, regardless as to whether or not Sackler purposefully selected the Indianapolis disaster because it conveniently happened to be "the worst American catastrophe at sea during the entire war" (Weintraub 395) involving sharks, the fact that the sharks attacked the crew of the ship responsible for overseeing the delivery of the atomic bomb is striking in its implicit establishment of a direct causal chain of events relative to the ongoing ethical introspections and atomic debates surrounding *Jaws*'s release; that is, that the crew of the Indianapolis were preyed upon by the sharks as a consequence of their role in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Thence, in tandem

with the conflictual relationship existing between the two characters, Quint's speech ergo undermines Hooper's initial stereotyping of the shark as a mindless savage that is espoused during an earlier scene in which the young oceanographer attempts to persuade the stubbornly recalcitrant Mayor Vaughn (Murray Hamilton) to close Amity's beaches: "Mr. Vaughn, what we are dealing with here is a perfect engine, an eating machine. It's really a miracle of evolution. All this machine does is swim and eat and make little sharks, and that's all" (*Jaws* 00:52:27 – 00:52:43).

By imbuing the predatory demeanor of the sharks with a certain retributive agency, *Jaws* "anthropomorphizes the shark as a malevolent, intelligent, and purposeful repeat murderer, with the moral and human agency and intentionality such a depiction implies" (Simpson and Lieb 140), transforming them from mere simplistic "eating machines" into sophisticated avatars of poetic justice upon the crew of the Indianapolis. Situated within this analytical framework, the shark in *Jaws* can therefore, as Dan Rubey argues, be interpreted to represent national "fears of retribution for the bombing of Hiroshima . . . growing out of feelings of guilt and doubts about the justifiability of our actions" (22). As Rubey further elaborates:

On another level of interpretation, the shark represents our own voracity and savagery in war. . . . There's a savagery we want to identify with when it seems justified in moral terms as protection of ourselves or others. But we also want to deny and externalize it when there is no such justification because we have unconscious fears of retribution in kind. . . . Here it is not a question of being punished for our actions by some superhuman agency. Rather, it is that we have somehow made ourselves vulnerable to the savagery of nature by our own participation in that savagery. (22)

Coincidentally, this looming threat posed to American communities by the "dread from overhead" is verbalized by none other than Benchley himself during his cameo role appearance in the film as a news reporter in the aftermath of the shark's fatal attack on young Alex Kintner (Jeffrey Voorhees) whilst he frolicked out in the

ocean alone (*Jaws* 00:16:50 – 00:17:24) – another tragic “disaster” which serves as an allegory for how history is biting back at a drifting and vulnerable America: “Amity Island has long been known for its clean air, clean water, and beautiful white sand beaches. But in recent days a cloud has appeared on the horizon of this beautiful resort community, a cloud in the shape of a killer shark” (*Jaws* 00:55:25 – 00:55:40).

This portrayal of the shark as a ruthlessly intelligent super-predator⁸ hence allots *Jaws* into the “revenge of nature” category so commonly associated with post-1960s Hollywood monster movies (*Willard* (Daniel Mann, 1971), *Ben* (Phil Karlson, 1972), *Frogs* (George McGowan, 1972), *Night of the Lepus* (William F. Claxton, 1972), *Stanley* (William Greffe, 1972), *SSSSSSS* (Bernard Kowalski, 1973), *The Giant Spider Invasion* (Bill Rebane, 1975), and *Bug* (Jeanot Szwarc, 1975)), what David Russell terms “deviant nature”:

C. DEVIANT NATURE: naturally occurring errant animals

1. SINGLE/LONE SHARK: single rogue animals

FILMS: *Jaws*, *Cujo*, *Razorback*, etc. (247)

In a similar categorization of the monster movie genre, Andrew Tudor deciphers such “eco-threat” movies as an ongoing set of dichotomous alternatives, each pairing a “broad tendency within the genre, not an exclusive option: supernatural/secular, external/internal, and autonomous/dependent” (8). For example, all of Spielberg’s directorial forays into the monster movie genre (*Duel* (1971), *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park* (1993), *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *The BFG* (2016), and *Ready Player One* (2018)) can be allotted within the “autonomous/dependent” category whereby “the threatening force is quite simply there, quite independent of humanity, though posing a threat to it” (Tudor 10), or, alternatively, the creatures remain “dependent on human volition, and the threat they pose stands in significant contrast to that presented by more autonomous monsters” (Tudor 10). For instance, the invading aliens from *War*

of the Worlds and the flesh-eating giants in *The BFG* would fall into the realm of the autonomous; the rampaging dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World* into the dependent; and the sinister truck in *Duel* and malevolent avatars in *Ready Player One* somewhere in-between. Additionally, Tudor's work puts forward a crucial question that, in line with the upstanding inquisition of Quint's Indianapolis speech, fixates on the assignment of moral culpability: "Are we responsible for creating the threatening situation, or does it emerge quite independently of our intentions and action?" (Tudor 11). In *Jaws*, the overall underlying implication is that human action is responsible for causing the terrifying situation posed to Amity and its residents by the shark; namely the Truman administration's atomic bombing of Hiroshima during the Second World War. However, the only individual residing within Amity who is linked to this specific historical event is Quint, a survivor of the ill-fated USS Indianapolis, whose atomic guilt is metaphorically conveyed through his bloodied hands during the pre-hunt scene in his shack (*Jaws* 01:06:18 – 01:09:09) and which he appears eager to suppress by attempting to erase the ship's tattoo from his forearm. However, not only is this shown to be unsuccessful, since Brody astutely spots the scarred remnants (*Jaws* 01:28:50 – 01:25:58), but futile, as evidenced in the sequence of events leading up to his eventual death.

"Farewell and Adieu to you, Spanish Ladies":
Quint's Demise and the Annihilation of the Atomic
Leviathan.

Having witnessed first-hand the failure of his traditional tried-and-tested shark hunting tactic – involving harpooning flotation barrels into the shark's back to physically exhaust it –, Quint changes tack and hastily retreats towards Amity in the hopes of drowning the shark in the shallows. The shark initially appears to have taken the bait, avidly pursuing *The Orca*, but Quint, manically reciting the naval shanty "Spanish Ladies," ignores Hooper's warning and pushes the vessel's engine beyond its limit, causing it to burn out

and render the three men stranded (*Jaws* 01:45:48 – 01:49:53), reinforcing Hooper and Brody's growing realization that, in Quint, "they confront a force whose will is as dedicated to destruction as that of the shark they hunt, and which cannot be compromised" (Willson 33). In the shark hunter's vengeful mind, an unmistakable parallel has been drawn between the Japanese submarine and sailors responsible for torpedoing the Indianapolis and the killer shark, with sections of his speech drawing upon Americanized wartime stereotypes of the Japanese "other" as an inhumane enemy posing an existential threat to Western civilization, and which must therefore be destroyed – a being with "lifeless eyes, black eyes, like a doll's eyes" that "doesn't seem to be living" until, when presented with the opportune moment, they shall "rip you to pieces" (Wogan). As Robert Willson argues:

In World War II, mutilation, severed limbs, showers of blood were to be expected in skirmishes with "the diabolical Japanese, past masters at the art of torture." The citizens of Amity are obviously in a war with an uncivilized, un-Christian enemy . . . the scene in which the Shark throttles a young boy on his rubber raft and bathers head frantically for shore conjures up memories of similar scenes of chaotic running for cover in movies about the raid on Pearl Harbor . . . an equally dastardly "sneak attack." Also, the use of floating drums to mark and slow the Shark duplicates the visual equivalent of depth charges when they are launched against a sub . . . The air tank [in the shark's mouth] looks, moreover, like a torpedo, the Shark has the sire and sinister lines of a sub moving in for the kill. (32)

Drawing upon Willson's interpretation, I alternatively view this tense cat-and-mouse chase sequence as signifying how the shark itself embodies the very torpedoes responsible for sinking the Indianapolis. The chronological placement, by *Jaws* editor Verna Fields, of a rear-view shot of The Orca heading back towards land, during which Hooper blurts out "I don't believe it, he's chasing us," followed by a shot of the three yellow flotation barrels speedily gliding over the surface to a notably faster rendition of John

William's ominous shark theme (*Jaws* 01:47:00-01:47:11), all tap into the awe and dread associated with this specific form of maritime warfare in which an invisible, cylindrical, and (considering the mechanized construction of the animatronic shark "Bruce") technological menace lurks beneath the surface in hot pursuit of its designated target who, with impact seemingly inevitable, desperately resorts to a plethora of by-any-means-necessary counter-maneuvres in order to evade it and launch their own counter-offensive.

Such countermeasures unfold in the ensuing scene, when Quint finally admits defeat and turns to a drastic alternative that he earlier derided as a "half-assed astronaut" (*Jaws* 01:09:25 – 01:09:27), namely Hooper and his motley array of high-tech underwater gadgets:

Quint: Hooper, what exactly can you do with these things of yours?

Hooper: Well, I think I can pump 20 cc's of strychnine nitrate into him, if I can get close enough.

Quint: Can you get this little needle through his skin? (*Jaws* 01:50:24 – 01:50:45)

Forced into a renewed sense of purpose, Brody and Quint then set about constructing Hooper's shark-proof diving cage, lowering him into the ocean in the hopes that he can inject poison into the shark with his dart gun (*Jaws* 01:50:59 – 01:53:10). Quint's willingness to seek inspiration and ultimate resolution by way of Hooper's "things" in this sequence is particularly noteworthy since, as the Indianapolis speech insinuates, "men like Quint on the frontline are the victims of boys and their toys" (Leggatt 171), providing us with one of the earliest examples of Spielberg's willingness to warn us of the potential dangers associated with one's overzealous approach towards science and technology (often by revealing the sinister sides of these particular fields) that is notably discernible in a number of his later films, such as *Jurassic Park*, *A.I.* (2001), and *Minority Report* (2002). Such a paradoxical scenario indicates how *Jaws* both celebrates and castigates scientific and technological

progress. Although Quint, Brody, and Hooper become potential prey to be hunted by the shark (itself a vengeful manifestation of human endeavours in nuclear-based technology and warfare), only the latter's assemblage of technological implements emerge as potentially being the marooned trio's saving grace. However, similar to the escaped Velociraptors which menace the human visitors of the sabotaged dinosaur theme park in *Jurassic Park*, for example, – another “disaster” oriented blockbuster that typifies Spielberg's ambivalent attitude towards science and technology – the shark in *Jaws* is portrayed as being tactically astute and unnervingly unpredictable. It ambushes Hooper from behind, causing him to drop and lose the dart gun, before destroying the cage in an attempt to devour the terror-stricken occupant inside, resulting in Hooper desperately fleeing to the ocean floor to seek refuge (*Jaws* 01:54:10 – 01:55:39) – a subtle inference as to how science and technology are not always the most effective solutions to the problems of man in a time of crisis and conflict. This is something which Quint himself comes to realize as he desperately winches up the cage which previously protected his last and only hope of finally killing the shark (Hooper), only to be greeted with the sight of its empty and battered remains (*Jaws* 01:56:30–01:56:46). The character's ensuing sense of foreboding is then conveyed by Spielberg utilizing a close-up shot technique which Kevin Lee has referred to as the “Spielberg Face”:

Eyes open, staring in wordless wonder, in a moment where time stands still. . . . The face tells us that a monumental event has happened. . . . If Spielberg deserves to be called a master of audience manipulation, then this is his signature stroke. . . . He has used it in a variety of genres in any number of situations: sudden shock or creeping dread, the trauma of remembering the past or of confronting the future.

Framed in the foreground by a medium shot, Quint takes one step towards the camera, then hesitantly pauses, casting his gaze out to sea, his eyes and face strained in fearful apprehension at the (off-frame) sight of the (out-of-shot) sight of the shark bearing down on

his now immobilized vessel, whilst behind him in the background, the cage suddenly breaks free of its makeshift rig and plunges back into the ocean depths with a resounding splash (*Jaws* 01:56:49 – 01:56:54), visually bespeaking what is a heart-sinking moment for Quint as he realizes his time has finally come since, as Antonia Quirke asserts, “his story doesn’t belong to the film but history” (113). The shark then, mimicking the torpedoes which wreaked havoc upon the Indianapolis, tears through the Orca’s transom by propelling itself out of the water in a supernatural flexing of its unstoppable predatory resolve, causing both men aboard to desperately scramble for safety as the vessel begins to sink, a nightmarish situation for both, either in terms of evoking a lifelong phobia of drowning (Brody) or déjà vu (Quint). However, one of Hooper’s oxygen tanks – its grey, metallic, and cylindrical construction bearing a distinct resemblance to a torpedo – essentially sinks Quint’s faint hopes of survival, crushing his fingers as he attempts to steady himself, and, despite Brody’s desperate attempts to grasp his outstretched gloved hand, slides him agonizingly into the awaiting shark’s chomping maw (*Jaws* 01:56:54 – 01:57:48).

Now, whilst Spielberg is liable to have the accusation lobbied at him by critics that this sequence signifies a visual acknowledgement that America must learn to literally and figuratively “let go” of their guilt for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, I am certainly more inclined – given the film’s surrounding context of Watergate and Vietnam – to interpret Quint’s demise as a reaffirmation of American national pride, strength, competence, purpose, and progression which dwindled under the presidency of Gerald Ford, declined further under Jimmy Carter, and was later revitalized by Ronald Reagan. Erasing Quint, a figurative symbol of America’s murky atomic past, clears the path for Chief Brody – the film’s stand-alone figure of credible moral authority in contrast to Amity’s unscrupulous Mayor – to partake in the “ceremony for the restoration of ideological confidence” (Britton 237) by triumphantly blowing the shark into smithereens (*Jaws* 02:00:19-02:00:56), sending the atomic retribution it

embodies sinking into the abyss and reaffirming the nation's history which is being celebrated amidst the film's Fourth of July background setting. However, in hindsight, the later revamping of Cold War tensions between America and the Soviet Union following the latter's invasion of Afghanistan a few years later, in 1979, does therefore reduce the therapeutic impact associated with Brody's triumphant annihilation of the shark to a mere temporary band-aid over the national consciousness. Nevertheless, it gives us an important insight into understanding how *Jaws*'s cultural impact at the time derived partly from its simultaneous ability to both articulate and allay societal fears and anxieties that a floundering seventies America had become an increasingly vulnerable and deserving target for moral – and nuclear – retribution by the mid-1970s, with its representation of the Indianapolis disaster fortifying the film's standing as one of the 1970s most significant cultural landmarks, where complex issues of national identity, morality, institutional culpability, and historical representation are negotiated – a sentiment echoed by its addition to the National Film Registry, a film preservation program established by the U.S. Library of Congress that selects films of cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance, in 2001.

“Anyway, We Delivered the Bomb”

Nearly 50 years on, *Jaws* continues to prevail as the most influential film ever made about the USS Indianapolis in Hollywood cinema history, with Quint's critically acclaimed Indianapolis speech providing an insightful cine-history lesson into this lesser-known naval disaster which pulls back the curtain to reveal more about this event's significance within the wider context of America's atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Indeed, contrary to other naval disasters that received a distinctly more doom-laden spectacle form of approach in various other 1970s films – such as the 1941 Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Jack Smight's *The Battle of Midway* (1976) or the fictionalized sinking of the American submarine USS Neptune in

David Greene's *Gray Lady Down* (1978) – *Jaws*' gravitation towards "textual speech" to depict the Indianapolis disaster may be understandably uncontentious following the degrading outcome of the Vietnam War but results in a nuanced portrayal of the technological superiority and inherent vulnerability of the U.S. military during the Second World War whilst adhering to a number of Yacowar's disaster genre sub-categories in its evasion of and allusion to the wider military, political, and ethical disaster of Hiroshima; the shipwrecked crew of the Indianapolis are shown to be no match for the predatory inhabitants of the Philippine sea ("Natural attack"); the ship's sinking abroad in Asian waters whilst carrying out its "secret" mission is both representative of and isolated from an American society coming to terms with the clandestine and illicit entanglements of Watergate and military defeat in Vietnam ("Ship of Fools"); and, by spotlighting the plight of the crew, it articulates contemporary societal fears of moral retribution in terms of a day of judgement at the hands of mother nature, the great equalizer ("The City Fails"). The underlying tones of disaster, secrecy, and immoral sacrifice which reign over the loss of the Indianapolis in *Jaws* thereupon endows the film with the propensity to render this historical disaster in contemporary terms, accommodating the dissident and introspective nature of the 1970s disaster film genre by reframing America's "Good War" in terms of savage retribution for the nation's serving citizens. Resultantly, this formulates a pertinent critique of Truman's wartime administration amid a period of vociferous political, social, and cultural attacks on American institutions, political class, national identity, and history that erupted in the aftermath of the contrastingly less revered "Bad War" in Vietnam – a not too dissimilar national "disaster" in which many Americans were resultantly and questionably sacrificed under the guise of a moral cause (a "noble crusade" according to Reagan). Doing so ruefully acknowledges, by default, the national "disaster" of Hiroshima, which *Jaws* (contrary to Stimson's official claim) exposes as having victimized both Japanese and American alike,⁹ a bitter historical truth satirized by the closing line of the Indianapolis

speech, which Quint delivers with a wry grin and an ironic toast to his now deceased shipmates: “Anyway, we delivered the bomb.”

Notes:

¹ For a more recent discussion on this issue following the release of Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* (2023), see Goodman.

² Various examples of this include 11-year old Hunter Scott’s successful *Jaws*-inspired campaign to ensure a Congressional exoneration in 2000 of the ship’s captain, Charles B. McVay III, who was controversially held accountable for the disaster by a post-war Navy court-martial (see Nelson), Paul Allen’s successful expedition to locate the lost wreck of the Indianapolis in the Philippine Sea in 2017, and the collective awarding of a Congressional Gold Medal to the ship’s crew by soon to be newly reelected President Donald Trump in 2018.

³ One of the biggest catalysts for this was the exposure of the harrowing effects of the bomb upon the city’s *hibakusha* at Ground Zero by American journalist John Hersey (see Hersey). For an earlier dissenting view see also Cousins and Finletter.

⁴ Rinjiro Sodei estimates that at least one thousand Americans residing in Hiroshima, including Nisei (American-born children of Japanese immigrants to the United States) and POW, were killed by the atomic bomb (see Sodei). For further reading see also “The Secret Sufferers” and Mori.

⁵ See Newcomb and Helm.

⁶ See Alperovitz.

⁷ See Gottlieb, Taylor, and Blake.

⁸ Stephen Papson has attributed popular perceptions of the great white shark as a “‘super predator’ against which human strength, cunning, and intelligence could be tested” (73) to the considerable commercial success enjoyed by *Jaws*.

⁹ Such an ethical dilemma is tackled by the other two films based around the story of the Indianapolis, Robert Iscove’s *Mission of the Shark: The Saga of the U.S.S. Indianapolis* (1991) and Mario Van Peebles’s *USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage* (2016), through their damning depictions of Captain McVay’s court-martialing and the detrimental impact that the Navy’s contentious ruling had upon the disgraced captain prior to his eventual suicide in 1968.

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