

Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, Nostalgia, and the Influence of Design



Watergate, Patty Hearst, and the Fall of Saigon were on everyone's mind that summer. The hangover from the sixties was pounding. Cynicism, skepticism, and the existential reimagining of the media's fidelity to politics were among the most pervasive elements in the air when Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* hit the streets in 1975. It was a time of economic depression, but people turned out in unprecedented masses for the movie. I've seen it a hundred times: drinking rum alone on Christmas Eve in my parents' living room; in seedy hotels in Australia; at a neighbor's pool party with the TV on mute and Led Zeppelin blaring through the speakers; and so on and so forth. I'll watch it a hundred more. I'm a sentimental guy. When Svetlana Boym died, I took a long walk in the woods alone and thought about about how much *The Future of Nostalgia* meant to me, who I was and where I

was when I read it, the friends I talked to about it, the bars we used to hang out at. Memory is an onslaught. Dreaming at the movies, you can slip into pure reverie and totally be yourself among strangers. In the summertime, when it's hot, there's nothing better than slipping into a cold, dark, matinee. It's the perfect escape, especially when something's eating at you. The theatre itself resembles the ocean at night, cool, dark, and mysterious, and there is perhaps no ocean more iconic than the one in the opening scene of *Jaws*: some teenagers are having a great time at a fictional beach called Amity Island, based on Martha's Vineyard. There's a bonfire, plenty of weed, handsome guitars, and lots of gorgeous people milling about on the sand. A striking young brunette invites an inebriated young man to go for a late-night swim, and they run ecstatically through the dunes, through the blackness, into the moonlight where she flawlessly strips off her clothes and dives into the sea, while he fumbles with his shoes, his belt, and eventually, passes

out in the sand. Meanwhile, the camera cuts to an undulating, underwater perspective, where we see the woman's legs gracefully treading water in the moonlight, as if she was dancing before the illuminating film projector itself. It's really a sublime shot, so beautiful we know it can't last. Then something happens, and we know the people, the village, the country, will never be the same.

Later in the film, the earnest Chief Brody (Roy Scheider), oceanographer Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss), and Quint (Robert Shaw), a thinly-veiled character possessed of Ahab's monomania, go out in the *Orca* (aptly named after the Great White's only natural predator) in search of the mysterious killer. Engaged in a constant demonstration of one-upmanship, the men eventually bond one night over tales of war, love, and the sea, showing each other scars, and even sing a lovely rendition of 'Spanish Ladies' in three-part harmony. But the real moment of truth in cinema comes at an unsuspecting moment when Quint gulps down a Narragansett beer on the ship's deck one sunny afternoon, gloriously crushing the can in his fist. And Hooper, Hooper with 'city hands,' follows suit when he slams his drink and crushes his Styrofoam cup. This is also the first time the Chief sees the shark, and, face full of terror, plainly states, 'we're going to need a bigger boat.' Note that earlier in the film, Hopper, a refined, college-educated wiz-kid, thoughtfully brings a bottle of wine to the home of Chief and Mrs. Brody when he has to deliver the disturbing news about the shark's magnitude. As the Chief, already six-sheets to the wind, dumps the wine into a pint glass, Hooper feebly suggests, 'you might want to let that... er... breathe.' Hooper is no more a beer drinker than he is an advocate of retribution: he is a man of science and logic, where Quint is ruled by his emotion, desire, and lack.

What does this have to do with design? I grew up on the beach, not far from Martha's Vineyard, and a stone's throw from Narragansett, where the beer that gets drunk in that definitive moment in film history, was brewed and bottled. The expression, 'honor the man, crush the can' may be lost on people who are not from that region, or simply unfamiliar with the film, but it is significant to note that it is etymologically derived from the 'made on honor, sold on merit,' the brewery's slogan. I learned that Narragansett released their commemorative 1975 limited-edition can through a text from a friend and I felt crushed. It felt cold and impersonal. Like getting

dumped. He snapped a picture of his hairy hand holding the ice-cold can and I wept. I'm sure his intentions were pure (he's my best friend) but in that moment, somewhere in Austin, Texas, I felt very far from home, and my immediate surroundings became unfamiliar. I felt displaced and sad, upset that the package stores in Texas don't carry that beer, and that no one around me knew what I was going through, that no one in this Lone Star town knew anything about anything. I wanted a cold Narragansett and some raw oysters. I wanted the smell of salt air and cattails. I missed my father and wished that we were riding our bicycles together by the bay. I could see us together from very far away on a straight spit of land with blue water on both sides. I felt my love for him and wanted to be near. Oceanic, as Freud said, at best. I thought of the sweet smell of his zippo lighter in the backseat of his Volkswagen Fastback and it was a gray day on Main Street and I could see the liquor store with the white Narragansett sign, the cool, classy lettering. It was 1987. There was another sign on Federal Hill where the old Italian markets used to be. I loved going up there to this nut shop with dirt floors to buy hot roasted cashews with my mom. All of these little memories come up when I look at this can, and it has everything to do with its design. I'll be honest: those old Italian markets are all gone now, and Narragansett is actually bottled in upstate New York these days, and to tell you the truth, it's really shitty beer, but whenever I have the opportunity to order one in the can, I feel a strong sense of place, a sense of history, and self, and I drink deep from the River of Lethe.

— Kyle Schlesinger