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## EXOTICIZATION OF SUBAQUATIC SPACES: INTERROGATING ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN SELECT MAINSTREAM FILMS

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**Abstract:** Underwater domains in mainstream cinema have always been depicted in opposition to the “civilized” spaces of human habitat. As cinema under water still continues to create ripples in the box office globally, it’s the need of the hour to raise a few questions and problematize certain issues regarding the exoticization of underwater spaces in films. This paper is an attempt to analyse how mainstream film makers, in the movies *All is Lost* (2013) and *The Shallows* (2016), commercially exploit the perceiver’s preoccupied fear of “ocean as a realm of the exotic”. This is also a study on how such exploitations facilitate the commodification of nature, normalize the portrayal of underwater spaces as the ‘Other’ and thereby emphasize a kind of ‘speciesism’ which continues as unacceptable as racism or sexism.

Steven Spielberg’s horror thriller *Jaws* (1975) can be said to have significantly contributed towards a paradigm shift in the American popular discourse concerning the connection between human beings and the ocean. Owing to the huge commercial success of *Jaws*, writers and directors started presuming that human beings are born with an instinctual fear of the abyss and they began moulding the undersea environments at their will. As a result, underwater spaces even in films of the 21st century continue to represent ocean as a space of unprecedented perils. This reveals the clear exploitation of the viewers’ subconscious fear of “danger of the deep” which in turn facilitates the commodification of nature in survival films like *The Shallows* and *All is Lost*.

*The Shallows* which was released 41 years after the humongous success of *Jaws* is indicative of how mainstream cinema has historically normalized the creation of a sense of otherness towards the ocean and its inhabitants. If it is the great white shark that occupies the antagonist's seat in *The Shallows*, water in all its vigour plays the role of an antihero in J.C Chandor's survival drama *All is Lost*. Here, a mainstream movie with no single dialogue is made captivating by featuring first person encounter with the 'ferocious' countenance of nature. Rather than indicating or privileging water as one of the primary elements in nature, the alien nature of the sea is highlighted and brought to the fore. This paper aims to further analyse how the various anthropocentric ideological tools used in the making of these two films get conveniently shielded by various narrative techniques.

**Keywords:** Exoticization, Underwater Films, Commodification, Subaquatic Spaces, Otherness.

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Seafaring narratives have always remained in the margins of film studies despite the fact that underwater cinema has a long-standing history of over a century. Steven Spielberg's horror thriller *Jaws* (1975) can be said to have significantly contributed towards a paradigm shift in the American popular discourse concerning the connection between human beings and the ocean. Owing to the huge commercial success of *Jaws*, writers and directors started conceptualizing and portraying undersea spaces as domains of dangers that exist out of the "civilized" spaces of human habitat. Presupposing that human beings inherently have an instinctual fear for the abysmal, they have been moulding underwater spaces at their will. As a result, ocean and sea life even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century continue to be represented as ghettos of unprecedented perils. This is the consequence of a clearer exploitation of the viewers' subconscious fear of "danger of the deep" which in turn facilitates the commodification of nature.

*All is Lost* (2013) and *The Shallows* (2016) are two recently released mainstream films that feature first person encounter with the wilder facets of the ocean. In both the films, the protagonists struggle to survive amidst the ‘tensions’ apparently created either by the ocean or its inhabitants. If it is the great white shark that occupies the antagonist’s seat in *The Shallows*, water in all its vigour plays the role of an antihero in J.C Chandor’s survival drama *All is Lost*. This paper is an attempt to analyse how mainstream filmmakers, in the select movies, utterly exploit the perceiver’s preoccupied fear of “ocean as a realm of the exotic”. This is also a study on how such exploitations enable the commodification of oceanic environment, normalize the depiction of subaquatic spaces as ‘Other’ and thereby emphasize a kind of speciesism which is as unacceptable as racism or sexism.

In this study, the concepts of deep ecology and biocentrism become important while considering the remarkable fluctuation in the aesthetics of subaquatic spaces. Deep ecologists unanimously reject the anthropocentric value system which lies at the heart of European and North American academic tradition. The fundamental tenets of deep ecology include: “Biocentric Egalitarianism” and an ontology of metaphysical holism which affirms that the biosphere does not consist of separate entities but rather it is a totality which incorporates internally connected individuals that form an ontological unbroken whole (Collicott 207). According to Robert Eccleshall and Vincent Geoghegan, its holistic view blurs any distinction between man and nature and affirms the indistinguishable right of every creature to live and flourish (qtd. in Brereton 11).

Cinema is basically an anthropocentric apparatus as in most cases, it places humans at the centre of everything. Even while documenting sealife and its images, the primary focus is on human relationship with the oceanic environment rather than focusing exclusively on sea and its significance. Since time immemorial, ocean has an existence way outside the social sphere of human habitat where people consider themselves ‘free’ from the clutches of mundane

existence. In other words, it is often conceived as a sub-terrestrial realm where they can surf, dive, swim, paddle, play games or sail at their will. It stands as a place where they can challenge the various constraints they come across in the land. Adding to the woes, the advancement of technology has enabled the documentation of images deep under the sea. This allows the viewers to envisage subaquatic images which stay beyond the immediate human environment. Such representations have a great influence on the receiver's perception and conception of ocean in particular and nature in general.

In contrast to such anthropocentric worldviews, biocentrists assert that all life forms have an equal inherent value and they blatantly denounce the irrational claim that human beings are superior to other living things. Conforming to such a biocentric notion, David Keller states that, "humans should be thought of as members of the earth's community of life, holding that membership on the same terms as also applied to non-human members" (qtd. in Brereton 12).

### **Before *The Shallows*, all was lost**

If one goes through the history of seafaring narratives, he/she would find that the writers and directors have always been interested in foregrounding the ever-present predicament of human beings caught up in the hands of wild seascapes. Released in the year 2013, J.C Chandor's quasi-silent survival drama *All is Lost* begins with the character of Robert Redford, waking up to discover water gushing on to the floor of his yacht. On inspection, he finds out that his boat has collided with a massive industrial shipping container and punctured his boat in the act. The scene sets the perfect ground for portraying the vulnerability of human beings in the hands of the 'overwhelming' power of nature.

*All is Lost* is not an out-and-out commercial entertainer. The movie slowly progresses and attains a pace as its plot demands. Though the action gets very much intense at times, the basic struggle for survival is portrayed in a realistic fashion. Maybe, the director was not

interested in further intensifying the action by bringing in an aquatic monster as in *The Shallows* or in *The Meg* (2018), in order to preserve this vital element of realism. However, even the realistic aspect fails to safeguard the movie from criticizing some of the threatening tendencies inherent in the narrative structure of this movie.

The yacht's collision with the cargo container serves as a vital event in steering the narrative in a specific direction. The important aspect of how a small component of Western consumerism triggers the Redford character's vulnerable state is conveniently concealed and more attention is drawn towards sympathy for the old man. After the collision, numerous sneakers can be seen discharging into the sea. Though the container is later dislodged from the protagonist's boat, it can still cause pollution in varying degrees and at the same time it poses a great threat to several other small yachts and boatmen. Such possible ecological consequences of the incident is not brought into the limelight.

On another level, this cargo container with its load full of sneakers floating around the sea represents all the rubbishes and trash that define the western society. *The New Yorker* review finds out the covert significance of this incident, that is "how a small staple of consumerism impinging on a solitary man in the middle of nowhere" (Denby). Later in the film, the viewers witness enormous ships loaded with goods sailing across the sea. These ships pass by without taking notice of either the old man or his lifeboat. A world that is guided purely by commercial purposes—here production and distribution—doesn't support broader vision or it fails to acknowledge the 'primeval' sealife. Entrusted with the duty of delivering goods 'on time', they have no time to waste. Therefore, they fail to see a declining figure on his life-raft crying out for help.

Water in all its strength turns into a potential villain in this movie. As David Denby observes, "Water is the major actor here, sloshing, slopping, pouring, swelling, cascading.

Redford sleeps in it, squats in it, walks through it, swims under it”. Rather than privileging or indicating water as one of the primary elements in nature, ‘the stranger nature of the sea’ is highlighted and brought to the fore. Here, a feature film with very less dialogues is made captivating by featuring the protagonist’s encounter with the ferocious countenance of ocean. The damage caused by the intrusion of saltwater is almost irrevocable. Food cans are seen floating on the floor and later a large portion of his ration gets swallowed up by water. Saltwater also damages the yacht’s lights, communication systems and navigation system.

At an earlier stage, rain showers (a source of water) offer him temporary relief only to come back in a heavy fashion at a later stage to inflict more pain upon the old man. Music remains still in most of the scenes. It is water with its echoes and reverberations that make most of the sounds. Mother Nature speaks in the fiercest fashion- the turbulent sea, heavy storm and strong winds communicate so effectively so that the old man gets scared of every feeble sound he hears around. This serves to create an impression in the audience that nature (ocean) is a giant monster from whose hands one cannot easily escape. It is this fear generated by movies like *All is Lost* which help in the commercial success of films like *The Shallows*. In short, such movies create the disturbance, generate a “fear towards the deep” and heighten the tension whereas out-and-out commercial entertainers like *The Shallows* make use of this tension and intensify the action by adding a great white shark or killer whale into the narrative framework.

At the same time, the seaman’s predicament is visualized in a terrifying manner with the aid of a wide range of shots in *All is Lost*. Earlier in the movie, when the protagonist climbs down from the mast after mending an antenna lead, his vulnerability is highlighted by showing his position from above thus creating an impression as if he’s fixing his gaze at the vast expanse of the sea that has the potential to engulf him. Extreme wide shots from high up in the sky are also used to highlight the precariousness of the situation. Similarly, when a bigger fish comes to the sea surface and attacks a smaller fish which the old man somehow manages to catch,

camera goes deep into water and highlights huge sharks swarming beneath. This reminds one of the Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest. Juxtaposition of such frightening images from underwater spaces with the accompaniment of alarming music generates a kind of anxiety in the audience. This is a narrative technique used to activate their subconscious fear and thus they begin reckoning the probability of the old man being eaten by a larger shark very soon. In short, the evocation of such powerful and frightening images from the 'wild' ocean serves to expose the reality that the chances for the Redford character's survival is very slim. Thus, the movie still lacks a progressive agenda though the cycle of life in the ocean is powerfully portrayed. Rather, it concomitantly asserts the existence of polarizing boundaries in cinema.

### **The Shallows- A Film that Lives up to its Title**

In this Jaume Collet-Serra directorial venture, Nancy Adams (Blake Lively) is a surfer who travels south to find a sequestered beach in Baja California, Mexico which was her late mother's favourite holiday destination. As she continues surfing, a great white shark interferes and knocks Nancy off her board. Her subsequent fight for survival and eventual triumph over the shark forms the core of the movie.

Nancy's rattling and jerky ride through the woods in the introductory scene foreshadows the perils that await her in the beach. Here, the premise is beautifully set up in such a manner that even Nancy's friend who promised to join her fails to turn up. As they arrive at the beach, the cab driver ironically tells Nancy that the place is a paradise and it just turns out to be the opposite. The beach, which is detached from its surroundings is an isolated system which has no association with the broader ecosystem. It is sealed off from the external world and functions more as a vortex into which humans are drawn in and shattered into pieces. Such practises are part of the narrative technique that catalyse the facilitation of the emphasis of speciesism. *The Telegraph* review most notably remarks, "Of course, Collet-Serra builds

tension with some of the same techniques that served Steven Spielberg so well in *Jaws*. There are the expected underwater ‘hungrycam’ shots, gazing up at dangling limbs, and a bassy score, suggestive of threat from the depths” (Collin).

The movie is abundant with continuous shots from under the sea, thus covering the entire frame with a deep blue colour. The technique is employed only to suggest that ocean is something that is away from one’s everyday reach. Such shots accelerate the distancing of the oceanic environment from the humans. Here, the cinematographer delineates ocean as an independent entity and presents it with an additional touch of wonder. He, in a way, colonizes the minds of the audience by creating an illusion that the filmmakers are providing them an opportunity to explore through their film, the realm of the undiscovered.

In the initial scenes, as Nancy and the locals surf along, the shots are accompanied by electro-pop music whereas in the same scene, when the camera goes deep into the water, the music becomes feeble and the visuals under the sea are shot in close-ups which assist in presaging an imminent danger. In the subsequent scenes, wide angle shots are employed in order to pile up the tension and to generate curiosity in the audience. Likewise, as Nancy tries to escape from the shark and swims towards the whale carcass, the shark comes from underneath and attacks her, causing a severe injury to her leg. This is one of the most spectacular scenes in the movie with the extensive display of blood and gore. When the shark bites, fresh blood spurts out of her thighs thus spreading out to cover the whole frame. In an article titled “Submerged Realities”, it is observed that:

The uneasy oscillations of fear and fascination, fact and fiction, art and science that thrum through our contemporary impressions of sharks seem to portend a particularly thorny state of affairs confronting shark documentarists aiming to portray sharks and their underwater environments realistically. (Ferguson)

Also, a wounded seagull is introduced into the narrative only to convince the audience in a later stage that Nancy Adams is the embodiment of compassion and empathy. The general human tendency to name everything in nature is reflected in Nancy's naming of the seagull as Steven. Though Nancy is stranded on a rock and her only companion is the seagull, much less attention goes to the seagull and the bird remains blurred in several of the frames. Towards the end, as the rock is about to submerge in high tide, Nancy positions the bird on a broken surfboard and sends it ashore before swimming to a nearby buoy and saving herself.

*The Shallows*, which was released 41 years after the humongous success of *Jaws* is suggestive of how mainstream filmmakers has normalized the creation of a sense of otherness towards the ocean. It is equally threatening to notice that in movies like these, the various anthropocentric ideological tools used by the makers get shielded by various narrative techniques. While conceptualizing a film like *The Shallows*, writer Anthony Jawsinski must have imagined how horrifying a shark attack would be- a narrative framework including a great white shark would provide the perfect space for breath-taking, blood strewn sequences while the elements of suspense and stimulation will also remain alive in the background. But much less studies have been conducted about the moulding of subaquatic environments in films at the cost of submerging the realities. Kathryn Ferguson argues that, underwater cinema has attracted much less critical interest in the field of film studies means that yet humans have not even begun thinking about the very significance of filming a movie under water or about their depiction of that 'Othered' space and its inhabitants in a hard light.

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