Seeing as Feeling: The Magic of Shark Week

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Introduction

A story about us

When I told people that I was writing my senior essay on Shark Week, the usual reaction was wide-eye surprise followed by playful fascination. I have enjoyed observing these reactions because they have helped me gauge people’s experiences with the show, most of which have been positive and enthusiastic. Initially, however, I struggled over picking my essay topic and feared that Shark Week was too trivial of a focus. My initial hesitation stemmed from the fact that I did not think that television shows had any influence on the real world. As someone who does not watch much television, I have always thought of television shows as distractions from the real problems facing society, never quite thinking about how the two might mutually interact.

However, as I started reading articles about the evolution of nature documentaries into reality television programming, I started to realize that Shark Week was less a window through which we watch sharks in their natural habitat and more of a reflection of culturally-defined perceptions about the wild. Shark Week taps into our tendency to view the wild as exotic and plays with our desires to experience the thrill that wild nature has come to symbolize. A large part of Shark Week’s success, in my view, lies in its ability to create the perception of intimacy with sharks and to move us to feel intensely, whether through bodily discomfort, anxiety, fear, or fascination. Rather than being just another week of TV sensationalism, Shark Week can serve as a framework through which we can better understand how influential mediated experiences can be.
As a young girl I was very fascinated with sharks and always thought they were one of the most misrepresented animals in the world, never imagining that years later I would be prompted to tell this story. This story is a story about us; it is a story of how humans choose to interact with the creatures who share their planet. It is a narrative that explores the ambivalence with which we have constructed the human-shark relationship and the conflicting emotions that dominate that encounter. My writing explores how the experience of facing the shark defines and shapes our own humanity, and questions the notion of the “real.” Ultimately, this essay is not about sharks; it is an account of the human desire to experience wild nature and an attempt to understand how Shark Week fulfills that desire.

Introduction to experiences

Shark Week is the Discovery Channel’s annual week-long series of feature television programs dedicated to sharks. First aired on July 1987, Shark Week is one of the longest running cable programming events in the history of cable television. You may first ask yourself, why is there a week-long series devoted to sharks but not other wild animals like grizzly bears or lions? In an interview with National Public Radio, Brooke Runnette, executive producer of Shark Week, answers the question. Her response, although a bit choppy, sheds light on an important concept of the shark as the wild “other”:

“No, or not even lion week or grizzly week, either. I mean, it really is about the sharks […] It's really about something that is so other, that so represents the wild that can come out of the gloom in a, you know, in an ocean, which is two-thirds of the Earth. Anywhere they want to be, they can be, and then look
at you, bare its teeth and sink back into the gloom. And it's almost more terrifying than anything.”

The shark terrifies us. Sharks live in the depth of the oceans and our paths almost never cross. The shark’s mystique stems from the fact that they are largely unseen. Whereas the ocean covers more than seventy percent of the Earth’s surface, humans have explored less than five percent of it. The ocean is a large unknown and the shark is its top predator. Whenever we watch a nature show about oceanic life, we are invited to enter a foreign, uncharted, and boundless space where humans do not dominate. It is a life far removed from the life we know. This is enough to make people sit and watch. Shark Week capitalizes on the opportunity to showcase this wild animal that both scares and fascinates us. The shark might be terrifying, but millions of Americans tune in every year to see images of it come to life. Why do people keep coming back, and what kind of experiences are they after?

Although there are many different angels from which one can analyze Shark Week, my focus will be on the multidimensionality of experience offered by this mediated event. Broadcasted in over seventy two countries, Shark Week is watched from diverse locations all over the world. However, whether it is enjoyed from a flat screen in our living rooms, a computer office, or a projector at a Baltimore Aquarium screening party, a source of media is always involved. As modern technology improves and becomes a central component of people’s lives, we become more exposed to diverse types of information from distant places. We can watch live

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footage of a diver inside a shark cage off the coast of South Africa, or take a virtual Google Ocean tour of the ocean floor from our living rooms. The capacity to experience is disconnected from the activity of encountering. More so now than ever, people are experiencing nature electronically and virtually. As networks of mediated communication expand, the process of self-formation and the way we interact with the world becomes increasingly nourished by mediated materials. In order to better understand how people relate these mediated experiences to the practical contexts of their everyday lives, we need to consider how mediated experiences relate to and inform the human self.

To better understand the relationship between the self and the media, scholars have drawn a broad distinction between two types of experiences: lived experience and mediated experience. Sociologist John B. Thomson defines lived experience as follows: “The experience we acquire in the temporal flow of our daily lives; it is immediate, continuous and, to some extent, pre-reflexive, in the sense that it generally precedes any explicit act of reflection.”3 A lived experience, as I understand it, would involve some sort of physical encounter that happens within the practical contexts of our everyday lives. You are experiencing an event directly, not through another person or source.

Mediated experience, on the other hand, is acquired through mediated quasi-interaction and is distant spatially, and perhaps also temporally, from the contexts of

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our everyday life. A mediated experience is an event that is physically distant from what the individual might directly encounter over the course of his or her day-to-day activity. Thomson claims that the event is unlikely to impinge directly on the individual’s life and the actions of the individual are unlikely to affect the event. Although he recognizes that there might be casual connections between the events experienced in the media and the practical contexts of one’s daily life, he states that because these connections involve so many intermediaries they are likely to be imperceptible. This claim assumes that a mediated experience is transient and does not produce any long-term effects or consequences that might carry over into an individual’s life once he or she shuts off the television or the computer. It also assumes that there are points when an individual’s “real” life stops and resumes.

For Thomson, this means that a mediated experience is always a recontextualized experience. As I see it, we can understand this in two ways. In one sense, a person experiences recontextualization when an event that transpires in a distant locale is re-embedded, via the reception and appropriation of media products, into his or her daily life. In another sense, a person can experience recontextualization when a mediated event moves and re-plants him or her into a totally new context that is far removed from his or her own. Either way, the experience takes place in a context which is different from the context in which the event actually occurs; this allows us to move between realms of experience while always returning to the spatial-temporal context of our current lives.

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4 Thompson, The Media and Modernity, 228.
5 Thompson, The Media and Modernity, 228.
The notion of recontextualization might be helpful to begin thinking about the kind of experience Shark Week offers its viewers. The Shark Week experience does not neatly fall into a single category, challenging, rather, the dichotomy of a lived and mediated experience. Watching the show we never come face-to-face with a real live shark- there is never a physical encounter. The show, however, pushes viewers to feel and to react intensely as if a real encounter was imminent. I explicitly avoid a valuation of different types of experience and aim to show that Shark Week, a mediated event, taps into longstanding, meaningful questions in Western epistemology about human beings’ relationship to wild animality.

In this essay I will be looking specifically at how the shark has entered our cultural consciousness and how the human-shark relationship has been constructed over time. I will then investigate how we are invited to participate in the Shark Week narrative- from the cinematic techniques used, to the tropes and metaphors employed. I will then explore how the show facilitates, with the help of modern camera technology, a bodily, “tactile,” experiencing of the animal world through the facing of death, and then an overcoming of that death. By eliciting in us an intermingling of different emotions and ways of experiencing, a mediated event like Shark Week can be deeply felt and significant. Not only does it stand as an entertaining learning experience, but it also serves as a platform that represents our human imaginaries and brings us closer to our desires of reconnecting with wild animality.

**Encountering the shark**

*Collective consciousness*
Until the 1970s, the shark was at the periphery of Western interest. There was hardly any media coverage on sharks, outside of localized newspaper accounts. Two books well known in Australia and South Africa, called *Shark Attack* (1958) and *About Sharks and Shark Attack* (1964), reached limited audiences in the United States.\(^6\) In 1968, *National Geographic* published an essay titled “Sharks: Wolves of the Sea” that stressed the unpredictability of shark behavior. Shortly after, a 1971 documentary called “Blue Water White Depth” was distributed in the United States by commercial theaters and introduced the great white shark to the general public.\(^7\) The documentary’s tagline, “The Most Frightening and Fascinating Sea Adventure Ever,” in conjunction with the caricature cover of a great white bursting out of the water with gaping jaws, made the video look more like a feature film than a nature documentary. The film relied on a dramatic one-dimensional portrait of the shark as a cold blooded predator.

Four years later, however, the Hollywood film *Jaws* drastically and uniformly changed how people in the United States perceived sharks and the ocean. Originally inspired by the novel “Jaws” by Peter Benchley, the film tells the story of three men in search of a great white shark that preys upon visitors of a small resort town. Released in the summer of 1975, the film was shown throughout 460 cinemas in the United States, and internationally in Canada and countries in Asia, South America,

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\(^7\) Papson, “Cross the Fin Line of Terror,” 69.
and Europe.\(^8\) With $450 million in gross revenue, *Jaws* became the highest-grossing film of its time.\(^9\) The film’s success translated into a flurry of media coverage, such as a cover story in *Time* magazine, three movie sequels, a video game, and two unofficial musicals.\(^10\) Although the film’s impact was far-reaching, this paper focuses solely on how it affected the perceptions of audiences in the United States.

*Jaws* elevated the shark to celebrity status, giving it both personality and internationality. Unlike the anonymous shark of previous feature films, the great white shark in *Jaws* was portrayed as a blood-thirsty rogue with a calculating personality. It kills several people in a matter of days, and purposefully hunts down the protagonist and his crew, destroying their vessel and eating one of them. The intermingling of cinematic techniques, such as false alarms and camera angling showing the shark’s point-of-view, with an adventurous storyline built suspense and drew the audience into the fear-inducing narrative. The film’s terrifying nature stems, in part, from what amounted to a technical glitch in the course of making the movie: constant mechanical problems with the movie’s twenty-five-foot motorized shark prevented the filmmakers from showing it too often.\(^11\) The shark is not seen until 60 minutes into the movie. It is the unseen, rather than the seen, that scares us the most. The anxiety of not being able to see the shark is heightened by the film’s eerie music. The catchy theme song, which revolves around an ostinato of bass notes, becomes the viewer’s auditory cue for an imminent shark attack. Composer John Williams said the

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\(^11\) Eilperin, *Demon Fish*, 47.
music was meant to represent the shark as an "unstoppable force" of "mindless and instinctive attacks." Duuuun dun duuuun dun dun dun … Anytime a person enters the ocean, he or she becomes vulnerable to a shark attack. The ominous Jaws theme song stirs something deep within us: a feeling of familiarity, yet also of unrelenting fear.

Before Jaws, people did not know much about sharks. After Jaws, what people knew about sharks was mostly based on this fictionalized narrative. The film, as well as the novel it was based off, materialized a potent fear of sharks within the public consciousness. Author of Demon Fish writes, “It was if by bringing a nightmare to life, Benchley gave it a credibility, a sense of concreteness, it had never had before. As a result, we become convinced that sharks were a far graver threat than they actually are.” The film tapped into our fears of the mysterious wild “other,” creating a cultural imaginary in which the shark is a killing machine that preys on innocent unsuspecting people. The film’s success, however, lies in its ability to fascinate people while simultaneously stirring a deep fear within them, leaving viewers in awe. As we will see with the development of Shark Week, the influence of Jaws reverberated well beyond its time.

Beginnings and early evolution of Shark Week

In 1987, twelve years after Jaws broke box office records, the Discovery Channel aired its first Shark Week series. The cable channel had just been launched in 1985 and was experimenting with ways to attract viewers during the summer, when

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13 Eilperin, Demon Fish, 49.
broadcast-network programming was in-between seasons.\textsuperscript{14} Shark Week became the spark that the network needed. Immediately popular, the event started pulling in an audience of more than 20 million every year since 1995. By 2008 the show was drawing an audience of over 29 million viewers.\textsuperscript{15} Discovery had found a way to make people tune in, and a cult following emerged. How did the idea of a week of non-stop shark programming catch on?

Most people in the United States have never encountered a shark in the ocean and never will. According to data from the International Shark Attack File, a person's chance of getting attacked by a shark in the United States is 1 in 11.5 million, and a person's chance of getting killed by a shark is less than 1 in 264.1 million.\textsuperscript{16} Since the majority of us have never had an encounter with a shark, the truth, accuracy, and validity of mediatized representations of sharks cannot be measured against a notion of reality attained through direct physical encounter. Rather, our relationship to the shark has been predominantly created through fictional texts such as \textit{Jaws} and subsequent texts and imagery. Our relationship to the shark has, in this sense, always been mediated; Shark Week is a continuation of that mediated relationship. The show has been able to attract and sustain a large following because it taps into the same phenomenon that \textit{Jaws} successfully capitalized on: how to scare people and simultaneously fascinate them.

\textsuperscript{14} Gibson, Meghan, “A Brief History of Shark Week” 	extit{Time Entertainment}, August 02 2012, accessed January 13, 2012. \url{http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2008020,00.html}.
\textsuperscript{15} Gibson, “A Brief History.”
\textsuperscript{16} International Shark Attack File, Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida. \url{http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/Sharks/sharks.htm}. 
Although early Shark Week footage from the late 80s and 90s was inaccessible, an excellent article by Stephan Papson from the Journal of American Culture written about the 1990 Shark Week season has helped me better understand the early evolution of the show. Through a study of ten different Shark Week episodes, Papson examines some prominent features in the social construction of the shark that, he suggests, heavily influence how viewers think about the species. For instance, he notes a reoccurring pattern of depicting the shark as the embodiment of evil intentions. Every time the shark is anthropomorphized in these episodes, it stands for evil.\textsuperscript{17} Statements depicting the shark as a malevolent predator are found throughout the episodes, such as “They circle cautiously like a pack of wild dogs” \textit{(Operation: Shark Attack, 1990)}. Or, “They come out of the deep and stir within us emotions of terror and dread, emotions that even those who know better find it difficult to suppress. They are the sharks” \textit{(Sharks: Predators or Prey?, 1990)}. The process of dramatization draws on the traditional conception of the shark as “he-who-lurks,” which was also utilized in the movie \textit{Jaws}. In another 1990 episode titled “Jaws: The True Story” Dr. McCosker describes the great white as having a “large black sinister eye”\textsuperscript{18} which reinforces the image of the shark as a malevolent creature with evil intentions. The notion that sharks are dangerous predators who hunt on unsuspecting victims was also reinforced throughout the more recent episodes I watched.

If the shark is an evil monster, the ocean is its dark layer. The metaphor of the deep is seen throughout the 1990 series. For instance, “Materializing through the

\textsuperscript{17} Papson,”Cross the Fin Line,” 71.
\textsuperscript{18} Papson, “Cross the Fin Line,” 71.
gloom and the curtain of feeding fish, man’s living symbol of fear, the great white shark” (*The Great Whites of Dangerous Reef*, 1990). The films allude to the primal fear of being attacked and eaten by something unseen. Oceanic depth and emotional depth are correlated; references to the deep call upon a human anxiety which brings out the fear of being attacked. Even if the shark is alien to our everyday lives, it is given relevancy by this fear. Since the inception of Shark Week, the shark has been repeatedly villanized as a threat to unsuspecting humans, often resembling the villainous and malevolent predator portrayed in *Jaws*.

“Without the hugely popular 1975 movie *Jaws* there arguably never would have been an annual Shark Week on the Discovery Channel,” 19 argues one Media Life staff writer. Is she right? Maybe. Most importantly, the movie *Jaws* gave Shark Week producers the ingredients for a mode of imagining the shark that was both catchy and profitable. Episodes of Shark Week are strategically crafted and synchronized with fear-inducing elements of *Jaws*, creating a platform that sustains the mediated human-shark relationship and elicits unforgettable but often conflicting emotions.

*Ambivalence*

The sharks represented in Shark Week are not immune to the mediated history through which we have constructed the shark- a history where actual shark attacks have been sensationalized in the news and fictional accounts over-dramatized by

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Hollywood. Although the shark is feared because of the violent nature with which it is imagined, people also approach the animal with a certain respect and veneration; the shark holds power over us because it can kill us. Our cultural imaginary of the shark is ambivalent- at once the shark is a horrible thing we want to kill (or else it will kill us), but it can also be something beautiful we want to research and conserve. We are simultaneously fascinated by and fearful of this animal. In other words, the way we engage with the shark is more founded on uncertainty and ambiguity rather than superiority. In a 2012 interview with National Public Radio, Brooke Runnette, the executive producer of Shark Week, sheds light on the show’s ambiguous representations of the shark:

**DONVAN:** Does "Shark Week" make people like sharks or be terrified of them?

**RUNNETTE:** Love them.

**DONVAN:** But isn't the terror really the hook?

**RUNNETTE:** It goes together. What it is, I think, is the word - the proper word is awe.

**DONVAN:** Awe.

**RUNNETTE:** And we don't really feel that that often. And I think it's actually comforting, in a weird way, in a counterintuitive way, to feel like there is something bigger than you that could actually, you know, that could actually kill you, and that yet somehow it all...

**DONVAN:** It's like that tornado feeling.

**RUNNETTE:** It's the tornado feeling. As you stand in front of a tornado, and if it doesn't kill you, you feel that nature is bigger than you, and that's the thing - that's right with the world.

**DONVAN:** But do your ratings depend on people being scared to death of sharks?
RUNNETTE: Again, not scared to death. I don't want them to feel like they're psychotic killers, because they aren't. They're rational actors. What you should feel is that if you see seals in the water, that's what they eat. They could bite you in half.²⁰

Runnette’s response captures the ambiguous, often paradoxical nature of Shark Week. The word “awe” condenses the simultaneous fear and fascination that the show cultivates towards the animal. Our perceptions of the shark move back and forth in conflicting ways- the shark is a scary killing machine but also a beautiful product of evolution. These contradictory perceptions offer us a glimpse into the unstable human imaginary with which we have imagined the shark over time. By tapping into this cultural imaginary, Shark Week exposes us to overwhelming feelings of admiration and dread, which, as Runnette points out, people do not experience very often. The shark has the power to kill us, but the mysteriousness of its power mesmerizes us. This is comforting, in a counterintuitive way. It makes us seek this experience in order to overcome it. We are attracted to the thing we fear because Shark Week offers us the technology and gadgets with which to overcome that fear. In exploring the ironic and ambiguous construction of the human-shark encounter, I seek to understand how Shark Week portrays this encounter and conflates it under the experience of “awe.”

**A Truth-Seeking Spectacle**

If you have ever watched an episode of Shark Week, you would remember it. Although each show is structured around more or less varying content, each contains reoccurring patterns of textual and cinematic devices that dramatize for effect. For

example, shark’s-point-of-view angling, intonation of the narrator’s voice, dramatic music, and short but striking visual cues that do not directly relate to the content of the narrative. I will be borrowing the language of Stephen Papson by calling these the codes of spectacle. These techniques help create a sense of danger and an anticipation of risk, which ultimately make the show entertaining and exciting to watch.

**Season 20: Aired: 07/31/2007: Episode: Shark Feeding Frenzy**

Host Les Stroud, also know at Survivorman, walks up to the deck of a white boat cruising in the middle of the Bahamas. Soft upbeat rock music plays in the background. Looking into the camera he asks, “What would happen if I went down there in the middle of a [shark feeding frenzy] and I hand-fed the sharks? Would they mistake me for food and rip me apart?”

After a shark-feeding demonstration and quick safety tips from diving instructor Stuart Cove, Les is ready to gear up. Suddenly, a frightening image of a shark jolts across the screen. The scene returns to Les kneeling on the boat deck securing his chain mail suit. As he tightens a buckle strap around his waist, a seat belt is violently tugged on. As he pulls up another strap over his head, two metals bars clang against each other. The sound effects don’t sync up.

The scene cuts abruptly to footage of reef sharks circling around the step ladder of the boat. Stuart jumps into the water holding on to a steel crate of fish chum. Les’ voice narrates in the background, “In a few minutes, I’ll be surrounded by dozens of hungry
reef sharks. A thin metal suit won’t stop a ten foot reef shark from ripping my arm right out of its socket. It’s a shark’s world down there, not mine.”

Air bubbles fill the screen. The camera spins around and the edge of a flipper appears. A flute howls. A dark silhouette descends through the murky water. Heavy breathing suddenly fills the background, as if contorted through a face mask. Slow high-pitched violins screech nervously. Les narrates, “As we descend, the sharks swarm behind us. They can smell the blood in the water.” A sunken old ship comes into view. Air bubbles trail behind the divers as they swim towards the corroded ship. Eerie flute shrills strike again. The heavy breaths continue to drone. The two divers kneel down on the ship deck. Six metallic grey reef sharks come into focus. The diving instructor starts hand-feeding the sharks and angelic-like chanting begins. The grey slim-bodied sharks start swimming faster, jostling in to take the bait. The chanting grows louder.

Biting. Thrashing. The water becomes blurry. A tuba blares out. Suddenly, the chanting stops. A lone shark swims toward Les; it’s his turn to hand-feed the sharks. Piercing flute trills strike. The camera zooms into a shark’s eye- a thin black band pierces through its white center. The image vanishes with an inscrutable flash of black and white.

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The highly visual and auditory messages in Shark Feeding Frenzy (2007) reinforce the representation of sharks as dangerous creatures, increasing feelings of anticipation as it becomes Les’ turn to hand-feed the sharks. This method of spectacularization is used extensively in feature films and often makes watching
Shark Week feel more like a fun movie than the educational program it purports to be. Another example of borrowed Hollywood sensationalism is the use of camera angling that shows the shark’s-point-of view, putting the viewer in the shark’s position. In an episode called *Top Five Eaten Alive* (2007) the camera focuses on a woman’s silhouette from below the ocean surface right before she is dragged under; this shot mirrors the first shack attack scene in *Jaws*.

Shark Week, however, is not trying to be *Jaws*. Although Shark Week does borrow some of *Jaws*’ cinematographic elements, Shark Week’s truth-seeking and myth-busting objectives set it apart from any fiction film. Shark Week, like the documentary genre, calls on attributes of authenticity and factuality to reproduce realism and involve its audience in the narrative. It functions as a truth-bringer: these events happened and were captured on camera. Similar to a documentary, Shark Week is expected to deliver the facts. In *Shark Feeding Frenzy* (2007) facts about each shark species are presented virtually- a simulated gray reef shark swims against a blue grid while two captions appear. The top one lists the shark’s diet: “Feeds on rays, crabs, and fish.” The bottom caption shows the species’ average length and weight: 9 FT, 300 LBS. The captions disappear and are replaced by a second set of captions that read: Danger Factor: 26 Attacks. Five skulls with cross bones appear, three of which are highlighted.

Another device used by both nature documentaries and Shark Week to legitimate their renderings as truthful is to refer to the misconceptions about their subject. All six episodes of the 2007 Shark Week season note a misconception about shark behavior and attribute it to either lack of scientific research or to Hollywood
sensationalism. In *Shark Feeding Frenzy* (2007) the narrator claims that although many scientists consider the reef shark species to be docile, in competitive feeding situations these sharks can easily become dangerous. References to inaccurate information and assumptions about shark behavior validate the show as a learning experience.

Whereas Shark Week depends on unveiling the “truth” about sharks, *Jaws* misrepresents real shark behavior and bends the “truth.” For instance, the size of the great whites swimming off the New England coast is exaggerated (they are not 25 feet long!) 21 In addition, the shark in *Jaws* is portrayed as a rogue-shark that hunts humans. In the movie, he stalks the three main male characters, destroys their boat, and swallows one of them whole. Since the release of the film, experts such as Professor Peter Klimley at the University of California Davis have confirmed that great whites do not stalk humans and that most people who are bitten are seldom killed. 22 Most shark attack victims die from blood loss from minor “exploratory bites,” not from being eaten and swallowed alive. 23 However, despite the violations of “truth” or “factuality” in *Jaws*, the audience is willing to participate in the illusion as long as the narrative is not disrupted and reproduction is credible. Although Shark Week tries to distance itself from the hysteria and hype created around *Jaws*, it is ultimately the bending of factuality in *Jaws* that gives Shark Week credibility. *Jaws*

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21 Papson, “Cross the Fin Line,” 68.
23 Martin, “The Great White’s Ways.”
serves as a reference point from which Shark Week makes a claim for its truth-seeking objective.*24

“Getting close”: Setting up a structure of tactility

Shark Week does not neatly fall into any official TV genre. Some have called it reality television while others have referred to it as “docureality programming.”25 Discovery Channel started using the term “factual entertainment” in the early 1990s because they had a sense that the word “documentary” turned people off.26 Historically, the documentary has been conceptualized as a “journalistic enquiry and exposition” and as a “radical interrogation and alternative perspective.”27 Media scholars, however, have noted a decisive shift toward newer forms of documentary which carry a certain “lightness of being.”28 This type of programming is founded on diversion. Documentaries of the “diverting mode” have a performative, playful element. They create a mood in which different versions of performance are intertwined with questions of sincerity and authenticity. This has created a new “structure of feeling,” which, I argue, is how Shark Week fosters the atmosphere of “getting close,” where we are moved to feel intensely and pushed to vicariously participate in the narrative.

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24 *There is a 2011 Shark Week episode called “Rogue Sharks” which investigates the “rogue shark theory” played out in Jaws.
28 Coroner, “Performing the Real,” 264.
A large part of the show’s success is its ability to pull us through intense dialectics of attraction and dislike towards the shark. Michael Taussig’s essay, “Tactility and Diversion,” comes to mind. However, I will only introduce his main notion of tactility here and will expand it later, when it becomes more helpful to understand the notion of visual domination through modern technology.

When we are invited to “get close,” we are no longer seeing, but rather, feeling. Our bodies jump; we cringe at the sight of a bloody limb; we tense up; we holler when we see a shark jump out of the ocean. The viewer is not watching passively but is pushed to react viscerally. Shark Week operates within a mode of tactility. We are made to feel the danger as if we were in the water ourselves. The human-shark encounter in Shark Week becomes an exaggerated performance since the real physical encounter has been always imagined with such intensity. The more we feel, the more authentic the experience feels. By making us feel - not only see - the show plays with our conflicting desires to tap into a wild animality that we have left behind. These dialectics move us between fear and fascination, respect and dread, discomfort and relief, creating a vessel through which we “get close” to a real shark encounter.

The show’s claim to factual content is crucial to how it justifies its contact with sharks. Self-reflexive references to the process of collecting visual footage, or discussions about the strategies used in attracting sharks serve as the ultimate proof that we are watching what was “really there;” the references are seams which signify authenticity of the production process. We are drawn to live footage of sharks because it makes us feel connected to their real physical world. Proximity is
facilitated by the show’s relationship to objective world. Factual references and empirical scientific tests carried out in the shark’s environment create a perception of objectivity, which is implied to be the superior mode of perceiving and understanding. The show’s claim to factual content allows viewers to enter the world of sharks on grounds of unveiling the truth. In the name of factuality and authenticity, the audience is invited to “get close,” or “experience closely.”

Shark Week’s relationship and claims to the true “objective” world allows it to perform its narrative within the dialectics of diversion and performance. The human-shark encounter in Shark Week is justified by a claim of revealing the objective truth about shark behavior; this claim, however, is intertwined with various elements of performance and spectacle that push us to react viscerally. This way of “getting close” creates the perception of closeness with sharks by facilitating an emotional and bodily experience. The show thrives in an ambiguous and collapsed space that blurs the boundaries between science and spectacle, eliciting conflicting emotions in viewers. Denied the possibility of the real experience, Shark Week producers move viewers towards a “tactile” experiencing where they feel and experience what a shark encounter can be. I will explore the “tactile” experience of death in the next section.

**Death without dying**

The horror is in the detail. A border of pink tattered flesh instead of lips; the skeletal framework of the throat; a hollow void inside the mouth that gives an eerie sense of depth; rows of cluttered protruding white teeth; a colossal quasi-mythical jaw
elongated by a slim nose. A sight one hopes to never encounter in person. Nonetheless, one can imagine the intense thrill of seeing this image come to life.

When footage of this great white tearing through the carcass of a seal is shown, my impression is that the show directs us to imagine that this too could happen to our body. But Shark Week does not stop there. Shark Week extends this fascination of the perverse to the dismemberment of the human body. Shark attack survivor stories and images of scarred bodies or severed limbs constantly remind viewers that sharks can lacerate human flesh just as easily as seal flesh. The possibility of a shark attack is always hinted at. Reenactments of shark attacks connect our own fears, desires, and pleasures with the possibility of experiencing what it is like to be “the hunted.” We are fearful yet cannot stop looking and want to see even more. We keep watching.

Season 20; Aired: 07/30/2007; Episode: Top Five Eaten Alive

A colorful globe fills our screen. The globe starts spinning as the camera’s wide focus zooms into the southeast corner. We approach the remote waters off the south Pacific. A large X brings the audience to their final destination. The narrator begins,

“For modern travelers, the search for an island paradise can be an allusive quest, but one morning in the islands of the south pacific, it becomes ... a paradise lost.”

On their voyage towards Indonesia, Andrea and her three friends decide to dock their yacht at an unknown bay next to a secluded island they’ve never heard of.
Practically in the middle of nowhere, this seems like the perfect spot. The day starts off as usual - uninterrupted sunbathing sessions, and carefree conversations and laughs. John, Andrea’s boyfriend, suggests they plunge in the water to cool off. Their hands embrace, their toes curl as the edge of the boat disappears from underneath them. The jolt of the brisk water shakes them to waking consciousness. Andrea splashes around, doing tumbles in what seems like an oversized turquoise bathtub.

Their voices rise and reverberate throughout the open vastness.

Narrator: “What neither of them know is that they are swimming in a bay once used as a dump for a meat processing plant, and that large predators have been conditioned to feed along this beach.”

John climbs back onboard, leaving Andrea in the water, alone. Andrea loves to swim for exercise. She starts swimming laps around the boat, warming her blood. She then swims out beyond the boat, away from the deserted white shores and towards the epicenter of the south Pacific. The sensation of being in the middle of nowhere fills her.

The shadow of Andrea’s slim torso glides on the surface, one arm reaching forward as the other pulls back. From underneath the water, her physique looks lean but vulnerable; her feet energetically whisk bubbles of air behind her. She continues swimming. Suddenly, she disappears. An instantaneous shock of pain engulfs her without warning. She is sucked down. Struggling, she reaches her arms for the heavens but sinks deeper down. Blood spews. A white sun spot illuminates an opening above her. Crystal water bubbles dance above her head. Could this be a
dream? The water is blackened with blood. She cannot see anything. She looks down
and makes out a grey shadow. She feels it gripping her leg. Her left hand comes down
in one swift instinctive action, striking the creature over the head. The animal
immediately releases its grip. Her limp body surges up.

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In the episode *Top Five Eaten Alive*, professional actors reenact five actual
shark attacks accounts. Each reenactment is supplemented with interviews from the
survivor; the interviewer is never visible. The reenactment of Andrea’s attack
crystallizes what I see as the main intent of Shark Week: to zero in on situations in
which humans experience a brush with death. Reoccurring references to sharks as
killers, repeated metaphors of the deep, and flashes of blood suggests that sharks can
attack and kill anyone, anytime. If it happened to Andrea, it could happen to you. The
specific scene described above captures our anxiety of what we cannot see and cannot
control. It relies on the trope of the unsuspecting victim leisurely swimming only to
be surprised by a beastly attack from below. The anxiety of approaching death is
augmented by the narrator’s distressed voice, the dramatic music, and the pressure to
“buy” time after the victim is bitten. The notion that sharks are deadly was
interwoven throughout all of Shark Week episodes I watched. Even the story of *Shark
Man* (2007), a man who tries to show the shark’s “gentle” side by “hypnotizing” it in
open water by rubbing its snout, is bombarded with over-dramatized allusions to
death. Shark Week’s exaggerated accounts of shark encounters are always framed by
the real possibility of dying.
Shark Week largely depends on both direct and indirect associations between the shark and the risk of dying. References to the number of shark attacks in a certain area, or a direct remark from a “shark expert” about the dangers involved in shark diving or shark tagging state direct risk. More underlying associations with the risk of dying are created through reoccurring images of blood flashed randomly throughout the episode, or the “evidence” of a shark attack, such as zooming in on a survivor’s wounds or scars.

French philosopher Georges Bataille wrote extensively on the human consciousness of death. His work is framed within the Hegelian dialectic of human self-awareness, which states that self-awareness arises at the moment when man confronts death without dying. Bataille believes that we become conscious of human life at its limits. The Hegelian idea of “staring death in the face”\(^\text{29}\) and surviving is what, for Bataille, was the foundation of human existence. Bataille was thus fascinated by cultural practices and institutions, like bullfighting, religious ceremonies, and hunting that afford individual and collective avenues for these encounters with death. These institutions recreate the dynamics of a sincere moment of sacrifice so that a process of identification between the viewer and the victim can take place. Unlike in our everyday lives that are ruled by regulations and limits these institutions allow us to access a limit-free arena where we can experience something profound: the meeting of death in life. I find Bataille’s theory helpful when trying to understand the phenomenon of Shark Week because the whole basis of the show is facing the shark, a wild animal that can kill us.

Just as Bataille was fascinated by these practices where collectivities are invested is a kind of vicarious death through identification, I am led to wonder if the same appeal lies in the partaking in the mediated experience of Shark Week.

Recreated shark survivor stories always climax to a moment when a human is attacked by a shark. The narrator, always a male voice, brings us into the scene; he describes the location, weather, surroundings, and the unsuspecting persons involved. We feel as if we were there. However, the blissfulness and carefreeness of the day is brought to an abrupt end when an unexpected panic erupts. Shark! But we never actually see the shark. We only see and hear the things that are meant to represent the encounter with it: dark shadows, red-stained water, air bubbles, thrashing, and incomprehensible shouts. The effects alone are enough to make our imaginations fill in the rest. After Andrea is pulled back on board, the narrator constantly reminds us that Andrea has lost almost half her blood and will die if she does not receive prompt medical attention. We are pushed to the extreme and are forced to imagine the possibility of her death. As we sit on the edge of our seats in nervous anticipation, we identity with the pain Andrea is going through and vicariously participate in her encounter with near-death.

But while the risk of death looms over every scene, death is never fully shown. The possibility of dying from a shark attack always lurks. Unlike in a feature film where we might see a shark attacking and killing a human, Shark Week will never deliver in this way. Real death is never realized. Bataille theorizes that man must live at the closest edge to death, or else he risks becoming ignorant to death, thinking that death will not reach him during his life. In “Hegel, Death, and
Sacrifice,” Bataille writes, “Thus, at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying.” We never see a fatal shark attack because this would overstep the boundary. Viewer investment lies in the building of suspense, the toying with fears, and the eventual outsmarting of death. The show makes us lurk at death’s edge, but reassures us when it does not happen. The fascination with violent death remains an anxious anticipation.

Bataille thought of the institutions that allow for a brush with death as necessarily reliant on spectacle and drama. He thought that the spectacle (a vessel of mediation) is the only way that man can access death, which is vital to his humanity. I previously talked about the codes of spectacle used in Shark Week, such as dramatic music, graphic images, and shark’s-point-of view angling, as techniques borrowed from Hollywood films that add value through dramatization. When examined through Bataille’s theory, however, these codes become central to constructing the emotional and psychological sensations of brushing up with death, which is at the core of Shark Week. Through this lens, the show can be interpreted as a platform, a sort of subterfuge, for facing death. The show affectively connects us to the experience of death, eliciting in us real emotions of anxiety and horror. Just as Bataille theorized that cultural institutions that allow us this brush with death rely on the drama of the spectacle, Shark Week too relies heavily on these codes of spectacle to facilitate this near-death experience.

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**Animality**

Bataille argues that the exact role of the institutions that use spectacle to make us face death is to expose us to death and then bring us back, transforming our lives into something more meaningful. Unlike the rationalized everyday worlds which most of us inhabit, Shark Week opens before us a world of excitement and immediacy. Boredom is cut out. But the spectacle does not only make us feel excitement; it also opens up completely new possibilities of experiencing that transcend the human world. The spectacle that is Shark Week opens itself like a theater curtain, showing us a realm beyond this world, “where the rising light of day transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning.”31 The spectacle allows us to temporarily abandon our everyday contexts and enter the continuous world of the animal where there are no boundaries of life or death. Bataille argues that animals do not think in binaries or distinguish between subjects or objects: they remain in a state of immanence. Bataille offers the following image: an animal lives in a state of immanence like “water in water.”32 In the animal world there are no externalities, no incongruities. Animals live in an animality that is free from rules, obligations, and limits; this animality relies on instinct, not rationality, and on continuous birth and death without contemplation. Humans do not live in a state of immanence; we live in discontinuity by subscribing to limits, distinctions, boundaries and rules. We abide by these rules yet are invested in seeing the rules being pushed and tested. We are constantly seeking a break from our everyday discontinuous lives and ways to transgress and recreate the experience of continuity. However, according to Bataille,

we cannot live in the continuity of the animal world because we possess self-consciousness. He writes, “Nothing is more closed to us than this animal life from which we are descended.”\(^{33}\) Is what fascinates us about Shark Week its invitation to enter this congruous world of animality, which we know is really closed to us?

Shark Week can be seen as a sort of transgression that allows us to enter a world that is normally unavailable to us. For seven days out of the year, we are invited to celebrate, scream, fear, and jump in the face of death—literally, as the shark becomes a symbol of death itself, and more figuratively, as the show’s various codes of spectacle encode the threat of dying from a shark attack throughout. This constant facing of death allows us to go beyond the impermanent nature of the human body, ultimately exposing the transience of our humanity. When we experience life at its limits we simultaneously see the limits that define our lives. We are brought to a limit that exposes human limits. We experience life through its absence, transforming the meaning of our own human mortality.

Is it possible that the excitement of near death in Shark Week affords an experience not unlike the experience ensured by sacrifice? Bataille argues that the principle of sacrifice is destruction—“it destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that unintelligible caprice”\(^ {34}\) Man destroys the animal in himself, and in doing so reveals human truth of impermanence. This sacrificing destroys the corporeal being of the human and the

\(^{34}\) Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 43.
animal, making the human “death which lives a human life.”\textsuperscript{35} Man sacrifices his body, meeting death in his human life. When we see footage of a shark attacking a prey, whether it is a seal or a human, we are not only encountering the shark but are also encountering ourselves. A process of identification takes place; we identify with the animal that is struck dead. We become the eaten, the victim, the sacrificial being. We feel what it is like to be the hunted. We transgress through this sacrifice. We watch ourselves die while living. Because we cannot immediately know death, this becomes the only way of knowing death without dying. Shark Week is an institution that allows for this transgressive experience one week out of the year. The emotional encounter becomes a rich and agonizing, paradoxical experience- a mixture of affection and fear. We become conscious of death at the very moment that death destroys our conscious being. The spectacle of Shark Week creates an emotional drama of facing death and surviving that exposes the limits of own humanity.

At the end of a bullfight, the spectators leave the arena. And when a Shark Week show ends, we turn off our televisions. We experience, we feel, we dread, but when it is over, we are still sitting in our living rooms. Last time I checked, Shark Week has zero fatalities to its name. Have we outsmarted death?

\textsuperscript{35} Bataille, “Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice,” 18.
The Ironic Victim

Unstable Imaginations: a copy without an original

Shark Week imagines the worlds of the sharks, enters them, and reproduces them to large audiences. But what does this reproduction really say about us? In his work titled Picturing the Beasts, Steven Baker argues that humans equate animals with ideas, or use animals in our intellectual lives as constructs, concepts, linguistic tropes and other forms of representation.36 He mainly argues that animals have been classified into a system of anthropocentric binary distinctions, such as edible-inedible, useful-useless, wild-tame, as part of a larger coherent set of rhetorical oppositions operative within Western thought; the purpose of such distinctions must be understood as part of a continuous process of self-definition in which that self is defined in opposition to an animal other or an animalized other.37 These sentiments about animals are typically projections of attitudes to humans. He notes that it has become commonplace to talk of the role of animals as metaphor.

In Shark Week, sharks signify danger, terror, or death. However, there is one frequent depiction of the shark that goes against this mode of representation: the 400 million year old “perfect predator.” Scientists believe that sharks have been evolving on Earth for over four hundred million years; although the exact number is debatable, it is estimated that modern humans date back about 250,000 years. Compared to sharks, humans are only a tiny spec on the evolutionary timeline, creating an odd

37 Baker, Picturing the Beast, 78-79.
dynamic between us claiming the shark vs. the shark claiming us. References to the shark’s 400 million year old history were made in all but one of the nine Shark Week episodes I researched.\textsuperscript{38} They were all single statements said in passing. An extended evolutionary history was never constructed. Stephan Papson noticed the same trend in the 1990 Shark Week episodes he researched. He argues that these references support the characterization of the shark as a vicious predator because they suggest that today’s sharks are more ferocious and more violent since they evolved and survived through a period in which species were larger and more ruthless.\textsuperscript{39}

Although I did notice the shark’s evolutionary history occasionally referenced in the context of shark conservation, it was most often used to justify its time-tested killer nature. The shark was predominantly depicted as dangerous, and the references to its evolutionary history gave ground to such depictions.

When examined more closely, however, these representations are problematic because they originate and are housed in our human imaginaries. The nature of human imagination and its relationships to memory makes the image of the shark rather unstable—neither time-bound nor space-bound.\textsuperscript{40} The shark becomes a “psychological animal;”\textsuperscript{41} we house the shark’s existence in ‘our’ imaginations and mental constructions, which rarely exist past a hundred years. Although viewers attempt to grasp the significance of 400 million years of existence, of deliberate, evolutionary change, our imaginations are limited. The magnitude of this notion

\textsuperscript{38} I researched the following shows: 2001: 	extit{Air Jaws}; 2007: 	extit{Perfect Predators, Shark Man, Shark Tribe, Shark Feeding Frenzy, Top 5 Eaten Alive, Ocean of Fear; 2010: Ultimate Air Jaws; 2012: Shark Week’s Impossible Shot.}

\textsuperscript{39} Papson, “Cross the Fin Line of Terror,” 72.

\textsuperscript{40} Bleakley, Alan, 	extit{The Animalizing Imagination: Totemism, Textuality and Ecocriticism}, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 200), 58.

\textsuperscript{41} Bleakley, 	extit{The Animalizing Imagination}, 58.
strains our memory and imagination. Temporality is never fully examined in the show, and inevitably, it is always the human presence on Earth which gives meaning and significance to the shark’s presence on Earth. Our imagination of the shark millions of years before our own appearance on the Earth serves to further mystify this animal, contributing to its already threatening reputation. Although we might marvel at this fascinatingly “perfect” predator, its test-of-time survival contributes to its fearsome image.

The popularly held image of the shark is unstable and paradoxical. On the one hand, its evolutionary nature makes the shark the perfect killing machine. On the other hand, it makes it a life-saver. Side by side with its representation as the perfect predator, the shark is put forth as an animal from whose qualities we can learn. Tools such as modern science help us tap into these qualities. For instance, in the show Perfect Predators (2007) scientists try to mimic shark skin to create new technologies. Shark skin is made up of special denticles that do not attract algae or bacteria, which allows the shark to glide through the water more smoothly. Researchers are trying to use the model of this “400-million-year-old material” in order to create hospital surfaces that are more bacteria-resistant. This surface, called “sharklet” is tested on places and objects that are constantly touched, which the narrator claims could be an answer to the enormous problem of secondary infections in hospitals. As the narrator highlights how modern science can help tap into the evolutionary intelligence of these animals, the tables turn. Why are we trying to imitate the nature of this so-called killing machine? Shark Week’s usual representation of the shark as a killer is overturned, even if just for a moment.
Ironically, however, these statements and images of the shark as a potential life-saver are juxtaposed with those that portray the shark as deadly. This sudden paradoxical change in the mode of representation seems self-contradictory, but it feeds the ambivalence we feel toward the animal.

When I first heard of this moment of gratitude towards the shark, it surprised me. It proposed a relation between humans and animals which is not necessarily an exploitative one. Is man admitting the shark’s superiority over him? This needs to be reconsidered. Hegel’s text on master-slave dialectic comes to mind. Hegel argues that if you completely objectify the object (in this case, the shark), it is no longer competition. There is no longer any recognition of the master’s powers and capabilities. Kojeve writes, “To overcome dialectically means to overcome while preserving what is overcome […] It does the man of the Fight no good to kill his adversary. He must overcome him ‘dialectically.’ That is, he must leave him life and consciousness, and destroy only his autonomy.”

We can apply this thinking to better understand why Shark Week can simultaneously demonize and glorify the same animal. The tug-of-war between the two characterizations is at the heart of the experience. It creates an instability that pulls us back and forth between fear and fascination of the animal. We approach the shark with ambivalence rather than constant superiority. If we are always presented as superior to the shark, then the shark loses its value as the epitome of wild animality that the show uses as counterpoint to our own humanity; it loses its fear-and respect-inducing character against which humans are destined to win.

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These unstable representations and paradoxical modes of representing the shark reflect back on our need for self-definition and self-validation against the wild other. We familiarize ourselves with sharks, inhabit their worlds through our own world-making intentions, and recognize their intentions and habits. In reality, however, we know very little about sharks. We do not know why great whites migrate thousands of miles across oceans and no one has ever seen them mating. We create hypothetical worlds for these “psychological animals” but we never really think of them as being “real;” they are not flesh and blood. They cannot feel or show emotions. Ironically, as we become more accustomed to seeing images of sharks on our television screen that entertain and divert us, we are pushing the “real” being of the shark further away from us. I would argue that our way of presenting the shark has transitioned from presentation to representation, and now from representation to hyper-realization and virtuality. In other words, through constant visual replication the shark has been reduced to a simulation. 43 As the “real” animal gets farther and farther away from the psychological animal, what do we end up with? A copy without an original. The “real” shark gets lost in our cultural imaginary and gets abused as a vehicle to promote socialized human values. As the representational idea of the animal flourishes, the biological animal faces extinction. In what follows I will explore how our cultural imaginary of sharks as killing machines is contributing to their mass killing.

*Extinction*

Whereas Shark Week has over twenty million viewers and is increasing in popularity, over forty million sharks are being killed each year because of long-line fishing and finning. Fishermen cast hundreds of feet of hooked long-lines in the ocean which are meant to capture medium sized fish like tuna. Sharks, however, also get caught on these hooks. Fishermen seize the living sharks and cut off their fins, throwing the fin-less carcasses back into the water. These fins are dried and then sold by the pound on the shark fin market, a thriving multi-billion dollar industry. The fins are mostly used to make shark fin soup, which is considered a Chinese delicacy and a symbol of social status and power. The soup came to be a delicacy during the Sung dynasty which lasted from 960 to 1279 and was coveted by emperors because it was rare and took elaborate preparation.

Today, shark fin soup is mostly served at luxurious events such as weddings and banquets and is considered a show of respect, honor, and appreciation to the guests. The market for sharks, however, is based more on the animals’ mystique than the flavor or nutritional value derived from its fins. Many argue that the fin adds no flavor to the soup; it simply adds texture while the soup’s other ingredients, such as chicken broth, add flavor. So why kill sharks just for their fins? In Chinese culture, the fin comes to stand for a lot more than it actually offers. A bowl of soup can cost

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44 Eilperin, *Demon Fish*, 88.
45 Eilperin, *Demon Fish*, 88.
anywhere from $45 to $150;\textsuperscript{47} it is a symbol of power and prosperity for those who can afford it. In Chinese culture, consuming shark is also believed to bring many health benefits; old Chinese medical books document the following benefits: rejuvenation, appetite enhancement, nourishing to blood, increased energy, and support for kidneys, lungs, and bones.\textsuperscript{48} Shark fin soup derives its appeal from a hundreds-year old tradition that taps into the powers and aura of the shark. The thought of consuming a creature that can heal you as well as kill you is a part of the experience of consuming it. As more and more sharks are being killed to meet increasing demand, controversy over the appeal of this traditional dish is growing.

The \textit{experience} of eating shark takes center stage. Shark fin soup offers something beyond flavor- it is the experience of consuming a powerful predator that is imagined to be both deadly and mysterious that sustains demand for the soup. The question becomes: how important are cultural significations of sharks in light of shark conservation?

The shark- at the verge of extinction- is appearing on screens but disappearing in our oceans. One-third of the shark species is threatened with extinction because about 100 million sharks are being hunted and killed every year.\textsuperscript{49} That equates to over 270,000 shark deaths per day. In the past three years, the Discovery Channel has teamed up with conservation groups such as Oceana and Ocean Conservancy to air

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\item Shark Utilization, Marketing, and Trade, Shark Fin, FAO Corporate Document Repository, Fisheries and Aquaculture Department. 1999. \url{http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/x3690e/x3690e1g.htm}.
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conservational messaging between shows; but the message is murky. We never feel the impact of what 100 million shark deaths actually means. Shark Week gets people excited about sharks—it is a week of marketing sensationalism of everything shark-related. The formula works; in 2010, 30.8 million people tuned in to watch the annual event.\footnote{Seidman, Robert, “Discovery Channel’s 23rd Annual Shark Week Is Most Watched Ever- Seen by 30.8 Million People” \textit{TV by the Numbers}. August 10 2010. \url{http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2010/08/10/discovery-channels-23rd-annual-shark-week-is-most-watched-ever-seen-by-30-8-million-people/59634/}.} But Shark Week does not make us see the relationship between representations of sharks as violent creatures and the violence directed toward them. Hyper-visual representation of the shark as a dangerous and terrifying takes out the responsibility of harmful human behavior towards them. It is difficult to feel sadness or remorse when what one is killing is, itself, a killing machine. Bleakley writes, “The virtualization and sanitization of the animal is, as we have repeatedly suggested, witnessed particularly in television wildlife programmes, where ‘wild’ is exterminated in the production of domesticated, consumer images.”\footnote{Bleckley, \textit{The Animalizing Imagination}, 58.} The shark becomes a consumable image that is normalized through our “discovering” and “celebrating” of it. Human discovery of shark behavior is performed through such a complex instrumentality of mediation that the reality of decimating shark populations gets blurred.

Shark Week producer Brooke Runette said that Shark Week programming is meant to make people love sharks.\footnote{“Jaws, Teeth, and Fins! Oh My! ‘Shark Week’ at 25,” Interview of Brooke Runnette by National Public Radio, Published August 16, 2012, \url{http://m.npr.org/news/Science/158936474}.} Some might argue that Shark Week inspires people to study sharks or to aid in shark conservation efforts. Whatever the consequences of watching the show might be, it is important to note the irony with
which we give ourselves permission to kill this animal. In our imaginations, the shark is the perfect predator, both profoundly mysterious and powerful, and Shark Week’s hyper-visualization of this animal gives us permission to “experience” its fearsomeness without feeling direct responsibility over its death. Paradoxically, Shark Week’s representations of sharks feed the ideas that lead to violence towards them. The cultural phenomenon that has popularized the shark is ironically contributing to its demise. While sharks are disappearing from our oceans, they are being re-animated and re-presented as catchy cable programming. We are reproducing images of sharks while the real shark gets further away from us.

The Visual Encounter

Visual intimacy: experiencing awe

As discussed previously, the codes of spectacle used throughout Shark Week are integral to not only the effectiveness of the narrative but also the power of the experience. The spectacle allows us to experience an event which is outside the context in which it actually occurs. It moves us across oceans, to the coast of Baja, Mexico, or Seal Island, South Africa. Sharks do not live in our backyards. We need to seek them out- travel thousands of miles across the oceans to remote areas where few humans live. Since most of us will never see these distant places with our own eyes, these places are brought to us. In order to make us feel like we are at the heart of the action, these locales are captured with advanced camera technology. Aerial shots, sweeping vista views, and maps of the body of land or body of water in question are
key visual elements to the show’s quest. Physical distance from where the action is actually happening is overcome by a sort of visual intimacy. Visual intimacy, gained through the breadth of a bird’s-eye-view as much as through the acuteness of a close-up, is key to the experience of awe.

**Season 23; Aired: 08/01/2010; Episode: Ultimate Air Jaws**

A black and white peak pokes through the water. The cello strings tremble; the drumsticks accelerate. The peak slowly reveals itself. It splits open and divulges a thick strip of pink flesh. The jaw continues to widen as a black rubber decoy flails uselessly in its grip. The chamber orchestra applies more pressure. A missile armed with teeth, it is firing. Halfway up in the air, the grey dorsal fin materializes. A quartet of trombones begins to screech in synchrony, ascending in intensity. The black figure courses through the air. Pectoral fin spreads to the side like a wing, this animal is bursting through a sheet of white. The bass drum roars, the tuba belts.

Suddenly, an explosion. The animal freezes in time. It floats above the water. The music dissipates; the moment crystallizes in stillness. An eye rolls back into a curtain of white. A religious-sounding chanting erupts. The chants echo through the animal as it begins its slow-motion fall. The mouth slowly reopens and water gushes out. A gill expands, stretching out so far that it reveals underlying red flesh. The eerie chants are hypnotizing. The other gills breathe open less violently, like seaweed being pulled by a current.

Suddenly, the orchestra pounds back to life. Trombones screech. The heavy mass crashes the water’s surface. Fists of white fire up into the air. The massive tail
contorts back, almost acrobatically. Inch by inch the body drops deeper into a curtain of white until it is completely engulfed.

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Breaching out of the water is a special hunting adaptation learned by great white sharks that has only been observed on Seal Island, about 30 miles off the coast of South Africa. These great whites hunt seals by surprising them at the surface, shooting up several feet out of the water to strike. The first footage of these "flying sharks" was aired in the episode *Air Jaws: Sharks of South Africa* (2001). Since then, the *Air Jaws* theme has been redone three times. There was *Air Jaws II: Even Higher* (2002), *Ultimate Air Jaws* (2010), and *Air Jaws Apocalypse* (2012). My description of a scene from *Ultimate Air Jaws*, aired nine years after the original *Air Jaws*, attempts to capture what new camera technology allowed Shark Week filmmakers to capture for the first time: the minute and intimate subtleties of a slow-motion great white breech.

Unlike in *Air Jaws*, where we see back-to-back simultaneous shots of great whites jumping out of the water with energetic rock music in the background, *Ultimate Air Jaws* slows everything down. Thanks to the phantom camera, which records up to 2,000 frames per second, footage in *Ultimate Air Jaws* is thirty times slower than footage in *Air Jaws*, allowing viewers to see unprecedented detail. Whereas a regular shark breech lasts less than one second, the phantom camera can slow the moment down to over sixty seconds. All conceptions of time become

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blurred. Details on the shark normally invisible to the human eye are made visible, almost tangible.

In a *Time* magazine interview with Jeff Kurr, a Shark Week producer and filmmaker, Kurr talks about his experience filming *Ultimate Air Jaws*. He speaks to the fleetingness of the moment when the shark breaches the ocean surface and the acute detail with which he was able to re-watch this moment on video.

“When you’re watching a shark attack a seal, or even one of our decoys, with the naked eye, it’s over so quickly your brain can’t even process it. It’s over in one second. It’s a blur. You can imagine that if the seal doesn’t see it coming, you don’t know what happened until it’s over. So, when you use a camera that shoots at 2000 frames per second, slowing the action down, you see every minute detail of the shark attack: the mouth opening up, the teeth glistening in the sun. You can literally count every tooth in the shark’s mouth. You can see the eyes roll back. It’s incredible to see this kind of detail in a 2000-pound animal while traveling at 25 miles per hour and flying that high out of the water.”

In some ways we can also think of *Ultimate Air Jaws* as offering the closest, most intimate, representation of the great white shark. Since most of us have never examined a real great white shark in detail, the show gives us the space to do so. Thanks to advances in camera technology, we can capture and reframe the shark in angles we have never seen before. We can slow the footage down, fast-forward or pause it. By manipulating time, we can capture a very rare and fleeting moment and study it in intimate detail. But I suspect that this visualizing process does more than merely teach us something new about sharks. What kind of encounter is made possible through this new visual technology? And what does the use of this technology tell us about our own desires?

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54 Townsend, “Ultimate Air Jaws.”
The two slow-motion breeches that left me completely stunned were both set against what resembled a religious chant one would hear in a cathedral or monastery. The shark’s body suspended in the air looked weightless and beautiful; the music made it look angelic. Goosebumps covered my skin. The music captured and held my attention intensely. But the shark’s overwhelming presence also terrified me; the shark looked straight at me. I feared this powerful animal, and yet was transfixed by its mystery. I became mesmerized and entranced by the sight of this magnificent but chilling giant. The chanting affected me in a way that an orchestra’s screeching trombones and violins did not. The moment felt spiritual. I was truly awed. This visual technology opens up areas for awe that are normally closed off to us; it offers us not only knowledge of the shark to the most intimate level of detail, but also a profound experiencing of awe that taps into our innermost desires to reconnect with our animal selves. This experiencing of awe is at the heart of Shark Week: a visual intimacy is created between the viewer and the subject which allows for a meaningful encounter with wild nature. This encounter, made possible through visual technology, allows us to fear and dread but ultimately empowers us to overcome that fear and control it. Ultimately, the images in *Ultimate Air Jaws* create an inescapable mixture of terror and intimacy, conflated in awe; this experience of awe allows for an experiencing of domination, which I will explain in the next section.

The panoptic gaze: experiencing domination

When a great white breaches the surface, it enters the human world- a world of air and land. For a split second the shark is almost tangible. The breeching shark becomes a trophy to be looked at. The slowed-down footage facilitates the
experiencing of domination over the shark and beckons us to gaze at the animal; we gaze *through* the animal. What the camera offers us is analogous to looking at a diorama display of giant stuffed grizzly bear mounted in a natural history museum. The scenes are similar. What Donna Haraway writes about the diorama can be also said about the images offered up by *Ultimate Air Jaws*: “There is no impediment to this vision, no mediation. The glass front of the diorama forbids the body’s entry, but the gaze invites his visual penetration. The animal is frozen is a moment of supreme life, and man is transfixed.”55 We face this giant animal and penetrate it with our vision. This visual penetration empowers us because it allows us to control the encounter. Although we are awed by this animal, we are ultimately called to overcome it.

Our fierce desire to pierce through the mystery of this animal is embodied by the *Ultimate Air Jaws* footage. One cannot overemphasize the degree to which these human-shark encounters are staged. If you look very closely at the footage of shark breech you can almost always see rope coming out of its mouth. This rope is attached to a rubber seal decoy which is towed by a boat of Shark Week filmmakers and researchers. The moving decoy is supposed to attract a great white that mistakes it for a swimming seal. These images are highly produced and condensed versions of “reality.” The truth is that, capturing images of a shark in the middle of a naturally occurring predation is very difficult- sharks hunt at dawn and by surprise. Neither the seal nor the human awaiting on the boat knows when the shark will surface. Kurr himself puts it this way: “Sharks are really unpredictable. They come and go and no

one really knows why. We spent two weeks with our crew and cameras waiting, and hoping the sharks would return.”56 By staging these encounters we regain some control over this wild animal. By fixing this animal in time, – on video- in the moment it penetrates our world, we re-represent it according to our own needs and wants. The shark moves us to feel awe and respect, yet our ability to gaze at it and re-present it according to our own vision is empowering. The experience of awe and domination go hand-in-hand.

The camera becomes our weapon. Shark Week footage, like other wildlife footage, make viewers believe that what they are seeing is the real, secret lives of animals. In truth, we know very little about the great white shark; we do not know why they swim across oceans at certain times of the year and their reproductive practices remain a mystery. But the lack of knowledge around the great white’s real behavior creates the excitement of stalking and capturing it. The shark is a mystery waiting to be solved. Shark Week invokes a system of nature that is anchored in the visible, the objective, collecting information about sharks that would otherwise be inaccessible and unknown to us. Man’s ability to hunt with the camera gives us the chance to glimpse at things that we know are out of our reach. The slowed-down shark footage represents more than natural curiosity about shark behavior; it is a gesture toward the taming and domination of untamed nature. Ironically, however, the more we know about the shark, the more its real, biological, being moves away from us. The more angles we try to visualize the shark from, the more we objectify it, trapping it in our museums of knowledge and discovery.

56 Townsend, “Ultimate Air Jaws.”
We gaze at this animal without the possibility of receiving a gaze in return. Author Arturo Escobar, an anthropologist who writes about post-development theory, has called this “the panoptic gaze,” or “the gaze of the guard who, in his tower, can watch over all the prisoners in the building without being seen.” He claims that this gaze has become synonymous with the apparatus of social control. Yet, he adds, the role of vision extends far beyond technologies of control to encompass many modern means for the production of the social. The “panoptic gaze” can help to understand the complex dynamics of Shark Week. The show attempts to overcome the distance and impossibility of encounter between humans and animals through the visual intimacy created by these slowed-down images - it works, we are awed. However, these images promote a form of subjugation. The experience of awe leads us to domination. We are moved to feel all-powerful and in control of the shark’s wild nature. Through our unilateral gaze of the shark we are ultimately defining the progress and superiority of civilized humanity. We become keen on dominating and on multiplying and bettering these images for the betterment of mankind. Ultimately, however, we do not meet the shark in this visual encounter. If anything, we meet ourselves. The modern human becomes the all-knowing, the all-seeing. This gaze, a scrupulous examination of the great white through visual technology, must be understood as providing insight into ourselves and into what we feel is at stake with “the advancement of mankind.” Shark Week allows for this sort of reversed gaze: We do not so much watch sharks as we see ourselves watching, feeling at once empowered and mesmerized by the images.

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“The Modern Man”: Pushing What is Possible

During its most recent 25th anniversary season, *Shark Week’s Impossible Shot* (2012) took visual capture to the next level. The show sported an even more advanced phantom flex camera than was used in *Ultimate Air Jaws* in order to give viewers unprecedented aerial views of a great white breech. The point was to get the camera to look *into* a great white’s jaw as it broke the surface. This shot, described as the “holy grail”\(^{58}\) of Shark Week photographers, was never successfully captured before. The show’s camera men attempt to capture it.

**Season 25: Aired: 8/16/2012; Episode: Shark Week’s Impossible Shot**

**Narrator:** “For twenty five years, it’s all been about one thing. Seeing the most amazing sharks in the world as close as possible … without actually becoming bait. *Shark Week*’s cameramen have been on the front lines throughout, risking their own lives to bring us some of nature’s most amazing sights. New advances in camera technology are showing us even more detail, at even higher speeds, to take us closer to sharks than ever before. But now we’re ready to take the next quantum leap, as we attempt to capture… *Shark Week’s impossible shot.*”

Cue the rock music. We are transported to Gansbaai, South Africa, where a team of seven male Shark Week photographers are assembling and mounting a camera rig for their seven day mission. We only see the final touches. Camera holders

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\(^{58}\) *Shark Week’s Impossible Shot*, Season 25, episode 2, Shark Week, Discovery Networks.
clicking into place. Lenses getting adjusted. Helium tanks being switched on. The crew’s goal is to capture the great white’s breech from a bird’s-eye-view; to look right down into the shark’s massive jaws and it rockets up from below. “So how do you get that shot from above?” the narrator asks.

The screen transforms into what looks like a virtual battleship board. The music softens. A white outline of a boat appears in the middle of the blue grid and the narrator begins: “A heavy duty helium balloon will trail fifty feet above the boat.” This is illustrated and labeled on the blue grid. Sound effects resembling digitized computer beeping accompany the illustrations. A label in thick white print appears: Heavy Duty Helium Balloon. The explanation continues: “Attached to the balloon will be a lightweight metal arm that secures the Phantom Flex high-speed camera.” The label reads: Records up to 3,000 frames per second.” The narration continues: “The camera will point straight down at the seal decoy which will trail behind the boat at the same distance as the balloon.” A yellow line is drawn between the decoy and the outline of the boat and is labeled: “Equal distance.” As the narrator explains that the camera will be operated from a remote viewing station inside the cabin, the camera zooms inside the boat and shows a computer. The camera zooms out as the narrator explains that the challenge will be fighting both the wind and the current to keep the balloon and the decoy aligned at the precise moment when the shark strikes. Yellow wavy arrows move the balloon left and right until everything on the blue grid aligns and a digitized shark shoots up and grabs the decoy. The blue grid disappears and we are brought back to the cameramen preparing their equipment. “It’s only a
$300,000 camera guys, no worries,” one of them jokes. He tightens a screw and snaps the camera into place.

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The phantom camera embodies the spirit of the all-knowing, all-seeing “modern man” that Haraway and Escobar allude to. This modern technology opens up two new ways of seeing sharks: from a cinematic perspective, offering impressive new angles and views, and from a scientific perspective, uncovering things about sharks we’ve never known before. Advanced camera technology allows us to take rare shark-breeches and transform them into platforms that are then used for close examination, education, and pleasure. This footage can be widely distributed and used for scientific research or public entertainment, and unlike the fleeting moment out on the ocean, this footage lasts forever. Brooke Runnette, Shark Week executive producer, says “It’s been a really happy convergence with science too, because the scientists can see things they couldn’t see before, figuring out new things, being able to identify new sharks [and] figuring out the markings on them.”59 This scientific spirit of “modern man” is infused throughout Shark Week.

However, when watching Shark Week’s Impossible Shot (2012) the lines between what is entertainment/education become blurred. The contradictory logics of the spectacle and of science weave their way throughout the show. Although there are moments when the narration reminds us that this footage can be of value to the scientific community (i.e. a camera called a “bite cam” showed parasitic organisms

59 Townsend, “Ultimate Air Jaws.”
living on the inside of the shark’s mouth) the rest of the show amplifies the thrill. The focus is on building suspense: will the rig technology hold up in the strong wings? When will the shark surface? Will it surface at all? Can we capture this shot without going overboard? Only towards the end and in passing does the narrator directly say that this imagery is meant to promote the study and appreciation of these beautiful animals. As our technology advances, the goal becomes to capture the animal from every possible angle: below, next to, straight on, above, into; you get the idea. Yet it is not clear whether these images will ever be of use to scientists. The show assumes the significance of the quest itself and asks us to vicariously participate in it. Shark Week’s Impossible Shot (2012) not only pushes the boundaries of wildlife photography but also pushes the boundaries of how far modern man is willing to go to enter the shark’s world in the name of “shark science.”

When Jeff Kurr was asked what people are learning from high-speed camera footage, Kurr answered: “I think the advent of high speed cameras is going to allow us to look at aspects of our natural world in a new ways we haven’t thought about before. It’s actually better than seeing it in person.” Better than seeing it in person? How can watching a shark jump out of the water from your televisions screen be better than seeing it in person?

Michael Taussing’s notion of tactility can be reexamined here. Benjamin Walter was fascinated by the camera and its ability to enlarge, to frame, and to pick out detail unknown to the naked eye. Taussing interprets that Benjamin’s view of photography had a sense of tactility; it allowed for a sort of “optical dissolving”

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60 Townsend, “Ultimate Air Jaws.”
where a still shot dissolves into touch and a certain thickness and density. Benjamin believed that this enhanced our visual perceptions, uncovering small details that reveal the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds. This “tacticle optics,” Taussing writes, is critically important because we normally do not notice it in our everyday lives. As Taussing puts it himself,

“[Tactile optics] was a crucial part of a more exact relation to the objective world, and thus it could not but problematize consciousness of that world, while at the same time intermingling fantasy and hope, as in dream, with waking life. In rewiring seeing as tactility, and hence as habitual knowledge, a sort of technological or secular magic was brought into being and sustained. It displaced the earlier magic […] of a pretechnological age and did so by a process that is well worth our attention, a process of demystification and reenchantment.”

In a sense, tactile optics allows us to experience “seeing” in a totally new way. The camera allows us to “copy reality,” to become more conscious of our objective world, but in a highly substantial, tactile way. Through this “technological magic” we not only uncover the objective shark reality that is normally unavailable to us, but also re-mystify this same reality by making it aesthetically attractive, entertaining, and emotionally engaging. The show mixes conscious with unconscious, human with animal world, and dream with waking life; this creates a type of “magic” embodied by modern camera technology that does not only allow for a visual penetration into the objective world of sharks, but also gives us a way of experiencing their animal world by operating upon us viscerally. The video footage allows us to imagine what the experience of seeing a shark can feel like. We imagine and sense the force of the animal and the harm it could inflict, but the physical risk is removed. We are given all

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the benefits of feeling this animal from up close without having to leave our living rooms. Sharks Week makes the experience so exciting and gripping that it might actually be better than seeing it in person. This footage highlights the impossibility of a true in-person shark encounter but also exemplifies the possibility of re-creating and simulating such encounters with modern technology.

Watching *Shark Week’s Impossible Shot* was amusing, to say the least. By the end of seventh day, after numerous failed attempts at filming, the crew was desperate. After facing numerous obstacles, from technological malfunctions to weather related delays, the cameramen were crawling out of their skin with impatience and anxiety. One of the filmmakers was uttering, “Common’ shark, do it shark. Do it shark. Common’ breech, please breech. Please.” Finally, by a stroke of luck, everything lined up and a shark breeched the surface, giving the team the shot they had been awaiting for a week. The crew was overwhelmed with excitement, screaming and high fiving each other. One of them screamed, “That was the biggest rush ever!!”

But I, to my surprise, felt disappointed. The shot showed the shark from above, but the camera was too far away to get a good look. We never got to see *inside* the shark’s mouth, as promised. It was simply just another angle from which the shark appeared and disappeared. I wanted more. When I reflect back on this moment now, I realize that I too, as a viewer, wanted to be moved; I wanted to see something I have never seen before. The show creates the perception of closeness, but we always want to get closer. We desire to see these fascinating creatures come to life and this footage materializes and stimulates those desires; our desires, however, can never be satiated. Shark Week embodies the modern man spirit of tempting with wild animality. The
shark fascinates us, but we can never really know it or enter it fully because quite simply, humans are not adapted to live among sharks and the possibility of dying from a shark-encounter is always present. This visual footage both replaces the experience and serves as a map of the experience. The impossibility of a true shark encounter is highlighted by the constant struggles of filming this episode and the lackluster of the finished product.

The “impossible shot” is not an actual photograph or image. We can think of the “impossible shot” as a representation of modern man’s desire to objectify, capture, and then re-produce the wild animal- a constant attempt to push the limits of what is possible in hopes of creating a “panoptic gaze” that sees and knows all. Ultimately, the visual footage embodies our desire to face wild nature but also denies us the possibility of such an experience. Our willingness to push what we think is possible is what makes us human. Now that we captured “the impossible shot,” what is next?

**Reality and Imaginary: The Illusion**

Throughout my essay I often used the word “real.” For instance, “Shark Week tries to get us as close as possible to the real human-shark encounter.” Although the notion that a “real” encounter exists is foundational to my argument, it is also the very thing that topples it. Shark Week’s success lies in its relationship to the real; it shows us footage of real wild sharks, not animated or mechanical ones. Yet the show never delivers – we never come face-to-face with a live shark.
So what is a “real” encounter with a great white shark actually like? Usually, it happens through steel bars. The human, inside a shark diving cage, looks out anxiously beyond the steel enclosure. The water is murky. He scans the endless ocean for some sign of life besides the school of fish around him. Suddenly, a massive grey figure materializes out of the depths. Everything stands still, except his breathing distorted through the face mask. There is no dramatic film score music; no chomping sound effects. The shadow becomes clearer- it is a large great white shark and she is swimming towards him. She passes once and looks uninterestingly at him with her left eye. There is no blood. The shark loops back around and he manages to snap two photos of her. There is no trashing. The diver’s goggles begin to fog up. She disappears back into the murkiness. The moment felt naked.

Was that the “authentic” shark encounter? The cage restrains the human because it serves as a concrete barrier between him and the shark, but at the same time emancipates him by pushing up against his limits. The human was physically in the water with the shark, yet the human is encaged like an animal in a zoo. The impossibility of a “real” human-shark encounter among two equals is highlighted by the presence of the steel cage and the face mask that allows the diver to breathe underwater. “Reality” will always be colored by the fact that humans are not adapted to live among sharks. The contrast between the context we live in and the context sharks thrive in reinforces our humanness by pushing up against it. The craving for a “real” shark encounter speaks to the human desire to transcend the limits of the human world and to enter the congruous world of wild animality.
Historically, the human-shark relationship has been constructed around violence. The shark was imagined as a killing-machine and a threat to humans. The show taps into this cultural imaginary and makes the fear of dying from a shark attack feel very tangible. However, the truth is that sharks rarely kill people. There have been only 245 documented attacks on humans and 64 fatalities since 1876. The impossibility (and rarity) of a true shark encounter is highlighted by the over-exaggerated and hyper-visualized manner with which the show represents sharks. Codes of spectacle and over-dramatized representations of the shark as a symbol of death force us to feel the drama of the imagined shark encounter. The fascination with sharks remains largely anticipation and hyper-representation of what is wild and untamed.

Throughout my paper I tried to play with the notion of reality. Can seeing and feeling something on television equate to the act of encountering that same thing? Do we need to physically encounter something for it to be real? When we watch Shark Week, we are inevitably doing something very passive- sitting in front of our televisions. Yet this mediated event creates a sort of recontextualization. The wild-the shark- meets the tamed- the human; the wilderness- the ocean- is juxtaposed with civilization- our living room. This moment of encountering brings to light the human desire to come face-to-face with the animal world, unencumbered by the restraints of civilization. We ultimately define what it means to be human by our desires to face the animal other.

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Shark Week creates and perpetuates the illusion of humans getting closer to sharks. As our technology advances, this illusion becomes increasingly convincing. Modern technology, such as the phantom camera, creates a visual intimacy between the viewer and the subject that leaves viewers in awe. However, this experience of awe goes hand-in-hand with our desire to overcome what is wild and untamed. Our attempt to push the limits of our knowledge and our proximity to sharks with the development of advanced technology embodies modern man’s spirit of overcoming and domination. Photography, knowledge-seeking, and the testing of technology become strategies that facilitate this spirit of “discovering.” Shark Week allows people to put themselves at risk and dominate nature without overtly violating it. We create a “panoptic gaze” that allows us to gaze without being seen.

However, our desire to experience wild animality can never be fully satiated because of the nature of mediated experiences. Mediated experiences connect us to our perceptions and imaginations of what is real. The show calls on attributes of authenticity and factuality to reproduce realism, but can only make us imagine what the shark’s world is really like. A mediated experience like Shark Week blurs the lines between “reality” and “imaginary,” reminding us that there is not a single point when life stops or begins. By turning “seeing” into “feeling” the show collapses the boundaries between education/entertainment and science/spectacle to conjure up the ultimate experience of “getting close.” Shark Week teaches us that we do not need to physically encounter the shark for it to feel real. The ambivalent emotions and experiences of adventure, awe, and domination are at the forefront. As we move through the experiences of Shark Week, the distinctions between what is real,
imagined, human, or animal fall away – the real human-shark encounter is actually an illusion. The magic of Shark Week is that it fulfills our desire to experience that illusion.

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