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“Shark Porn: Film Genre, Reception Studies, and Chris Kentis’ *Open Water*”

By Walter Metz

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I. The Ethics of Pornography Studies: A Centrist Defense of the Public Space

One of the canonical texts emerging in the discipline of pornography studies is *Pam and Tommy Lee: Hardcore and Uncensored* (1997). In the anthology, *Porn Studies*, edited by the discipline’s founder, Linda Williams, Minette Hillyer studies the stolen home movie in which a *Baywatch* star and the drummer for Motley Crue have sex for eight minutes. Hillyer in turn reacts to another study of this videotape, “Pamela Anderson on the Slippery Slope,” written by Chuck Kleinhans for an anthology which playfully mourns the death of the cinema in the 1990s. In an investigative area that has only begun producing scholarship, which studies a media industry that produces a staggeringly huge number of films, the crystallization of commentary around one text is remarkable.

I have not seen this video, nor do I ever intend to. I instead want to use it to define a theoretical path for discussing a) my worries about the academic orgasm of interest in pornography, and b) my interpretive experience with a film which played at my local multiplex, *Open Water* (Chris Kentis, 2003). I find *Open Water* simply more interesting to talk about than I do pornography. Rather than engage pornography as a generic form, I want to use it as a reception framework for discussing a horror film I find more aesthetically engaging.

I realize of course, that there are political matters at stake in snubbing pornography. Cultural studies rightfully fights against repression and censorship, whether

it comes from the Left (Andrea Dworkin) or the Right (Jerry Falwell). However, any sense of a center, of consensus, in American life has been demolished, both by the collapse of the New Left in the 1970s, and by the vicious neo-conservative onslaught of the subsequent years. I think it is the obligation of academics, as part of an institution of social life (and not as some fuzzy rebellion warmed over from the 1960s) to theorize and represent this center. While the applicability of this concept applies to many domains of culture, certainly our desperately dysfunctional political morass, I want to explore the benefits of the center with respect to pornography studies.

As Linda Williams reports in her introduction to *Porn Studies*, “teaching the conflicts” about the feminist debate about pornography was not productive when she tried it in class. I am not surprised. I am actually quite hopeful about the world, not because of American politics, certainly, but because of the centrist level-headedness of my students. When I prattle on in class about Marxist theory, they tolerate my shenanigans, shrug their shoulders, and then set again about the work of producing the films they came to college to make. I do not find their lack of enthusiasm at all disconcerting: they respectfully learn the ideas and incorporate them into their world-view, exactly as I would have it as an educator (and specifically not an activist). Similarly, when I engage in my frequent diatribes against George Bush and conservative politics in America, they do not seem particularly disagreeable.

The way pornography studies is developing seems to me to strike quite a different tone. The anti-pornography feminists are constructed by this new discipline as the straw men against which a wonderful politics of liberation are offered. While I respect Linda Williams’ work very much, and will rely heavily on her “Film Bodies” essay to do my

work on *Open Water*, she, as the motor force behind this discipline of pornography studies, is certainly one of the prime culprits. In the introduction to *Porn Studies*, Williams positions herself as explicitly engaged in the decimation of the anti-pornography feminism of the Andrea Dworkins of the world. In explaining her reasons for abandoning her position to *not* teach pornography—I find the original position quite sensible—Williams cites Catherine MacKinnon’s article in *Ms. Magazine* in 1993 arguing that pornography was the motor force behind the Serbian rapists in Bosnia. Williams saw this as “the last straw” (12), and began teaching about pornography as a way to combat what to her seemed the anti-pornography feminists’ obviously indefensible position.

I know nothing at all about the psychological theories of trauma that would allow one to endorse or refute MacKinnon’s claim. Whether MacKinnon or Williams know enough about the science of such things, I will leave for others to determine. Instead, I want to relate an anecdote about an experience I had that pertains to taking such positions. I was kindly invited by the Women’s Center at my University to serve as one of the panelists on a public discussion about film pornography. Working on this project about *Open Water* and pornography, having just read the major works in the field—Williams’ books and articles, Laura Kipnis’ wonderful *Bound and Gagged*, Drucilla Cornell’s *Feminism and Pornography*—I delivered a defense of film pornography, essentially parroting Williams’ basic tenets: as the most popular mode of filmmaking in the world, it demands attention, and it is filled with a diversity of representations. The other panelists included a kindly man who volunteered in prisons counseling sexual predators, and the student leader of the University’s chapter of “Men Against Rape.”

Something incredibly disturbing happened to me that day. I came prepared with all sorts of notes, trying to argue my position as best as possible. The other two speakers spoke off the cuff. The prison counselor was the only one, on the panel or in the audience, who spoke strongly against pornography. The audience was mostly comprised of feminism students, some from my classes and some from others around campus. The counselor tried to defend his position—he noticed almost all of his patients were heavy users of pornography—amidst the onslaughts, from me and others, about the illogic of his position. His position suffered, of course, from a logical fallacy, that pornography was a cause, rather than a symptom, of the anti-social behaviors engaged by the prisoners under his care.

However, I found it extremely disconcerting that no one even considered helping him defend his position. I am by no means trying to offer a conservative critique of pornography studies. Much of the insights into these films offered by the scholars in *Porn Studies* I take very seriously. I am delighted this work is being produced. However, there are some significant reasons to put the brakes on a rabid, radical celebration of the liberating potential of pornography. While pornography is clearly not the most significant causal factor behind anti-social behavior (either of the predators in jail in Montana or the Serbian rapists), it might be worth pondering why there is any connection at all. That is to say, there is something at the very least unseemly, and I would try to push for stronger terms, like anti-social, about pornography. This does not mean that I want to censor it, or even dilute the explosion of academic studies of pornography. But might it not be a good idea to interrogate the negative, as well as the positive, social effects of pornography?

The most recent anthology in pornography studies is *Pornography: Film and Culture* (2006), published by Rutgers University Press as part of the “Depth of Field” series. At the end of his introductory essay, editor Peter Lehman comes to a similar position regarding Williams’ pornography anthology. Lehman argues against a simplistic “pro” or “con” positioning of oneself in reference to pornography. I do not know if Lehman would turn to the center as I have, but his reservations about the euphoric state of pornography studies motivate my essay’s turn from pornography as an object toward its potential use value as a reading frame:

In reading Linda Williams’ massive anthology *Porn Studies*, I was struck by how little criticism or even concern her former students show for any consequences of... anything represented in porn.... In an effort to correct the fear and hysteria surrounding porn, some scholars have gone too far in the direction of simply embracing it as clearly not being the evil object so may writers and people in our culture imagine it to be.... It is far more important to be complex than it is to be pro or con and I hope the essays in this volume all contribute to a climate of such critical and analytical awareness or porn.
(20)

In this essay, I take up Lehman’s call. I am neither pro nor con toward pornography. I also believe that a culture that spends as much money as it does on pornography needs “critical or analytical awareness” about the form. However, the previous pornography writing focuses either on the textual or institutional matters of the pornography industry. One important consequence, and the one that I will explore in this essay, of an “analytical awareness” of our pornography-obsessed culture, is that the textual and industrial features of pornography so well studied by Williams, *et. al.* have penetrated our culture far beyond the generic border that pornography describes. That is, I want to use pornography not as a generic descriptor, but as a reading frame for mainstream Hollywood film. As my case study, I choose the Lions’ Gate Films release of *Open Water*.

To make a decision to analyze a mainstream horror film using pornography as a reading frame, of course, changes the most basic subject of analysis. Most pressingly, the bravery of discussing explicit, illicit images of nudity and hard-core sexuality does not characterize my project. However, even before shifting my frame of reference toward *Open Water*, we find that pornography studies, if not pornography itself, is in confusion about the display of graphic images. Lehman's anthology does not include stills from pornographic films. In his first endnote, contributor Daniel Bernardi, author of an essay applying whiteness studies to pornographic websites, questions this decision with characteristic equivocation:

This essay originally included a number of pictures taken from the web pages I critique, the most "explicit" being samples of Robert Maplethorpe's work. I agreed to my editors' request to remove them, but I'm uncomfortable with that decision. Have we undermined or even contradicted our arguments about pornography by removing the images?... Academic publishers have valid reasons for not wanting to publish pornographic images, so these questions aren't so easily answered.... Pornography has a long way to go before it is accepted alongside the musical and slapstick genres as a worthy subject of scholarly scrutiny, and what's most important is that the discussion continue. (241)

Conversely, Linda Williams celebrates her anthology's inclusion of graphic images. She critiques an earlier volume, *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment*, as a "well-meaning, liberal" (4), yet fundamentally co-opted contradiction: the anthology argues for the serious study of pornography, yet retreats from showing any images along with its arguments. Williams relates in a footnote: "In the case of my own contribution to the conference, I withdrew it from the volume when I learned that my talk would not be published with its illustrations" (22). I find this response absolutely childish. The position implies that a radical approach to pornography must be followed or, "I'll take my marbles and go home."

There are all sorts of defensible reasons for not including the graphic images, to which Bernardi alludes, but tellingly does not argue. One of the most important reasons to me is that they are not appropriate for polite public company. I celebrate the fact that one of human beings' most delightful behaviors is that they like to have sex with one another. However, the foolish 1960s belief that any thumbing of the nose (or other parts) at the Establishment is a good thing is not reasonable. There is a justifiable distinction between the private and public space. I do not take my clothes off in the public space, because we have a social contract that dictates that this is a good thing (both for me and for my unhappy spectators!). There is nothing oppressive about this social contract. It productively helps the social order get on with the work at hand. Sex is a private act (regardless of how many people willingly engage in its at once); the public space is for work, entertainment, the discussion of ideas, and whatever other communal endeavors we choose.

Last fall, I taught a course on experimental cinema. When I showed *Blow Job* (Andy Warhol, 1963), I had the students read Ara Osterweil's excellent essay about boredom in the avant-garde and pornography in the *Porn Studies* anthology. The students had a course packet containing the essay, but I brought the book to class. Like most professors, I like to show my students the full range of materials from which I pared down their reading list. As I dumped the books for that day out onto the seminar table, the Williams anthology fell right-side up. As I lectured for a while, I noticed this, and put the book down into my satchel until I needed it. The cover of *Porn Studies* features an artwork, Larry Sultan's *Havenhurst* (1999), an artistically-processed photograph of a

porn movie set in which a man is engaged in some form of unseen naughtiness while holding a woman's bare leg in the air.

As I put the book away, I certainly felt guilty for doing so. Yet I am not willing to put aside the original impulse that made me do so. I am certainly no big fan of victim culture in which every purported offense devastates the ability to conduct oneself in public, and yet, in a department in which 80 percent of the filmmaking students are men, and 90 percent of the anyway all-too-few students interested in learning about experimental filmmaking (2 out of 20) were women, I did not want to construct a classroom climate that was in any way uncomfortable.

The image that illustrates Hillyer's essay is even worse than the cover. The caption reads, "Pam Sucks Tommy's Cock." It is a close-up of Pamela Anderson fellating an erect penis that takes up half of the image. I really do not have any problem with lovers enjoying oral sex with one another. However, it is simply inappropriate for this to become a public image. The engagement in acts of sex should be a private affair. Inside the private space, I really do not care what people want to do as consensual members of a loving relationship. However, the civic and civil reasons for containing sexuality (both physical and imagistic) to the private space are compelling, and not the result of prudishness and intolerance.

The ethics of *Porn Studies*' display of the fellatio image are already shady; the original *access* to this image is even more ethically cloudy. Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee sued the distributors of the tape, Internet Entertainment Group (IEG), yet lost their court case for legal reasons that confound me (and them). The judge ruled that the video, although stolen from their home, while locked in a subterranean vault (!), was

“newsworthy.” While it is clear that Ms. Anderson and Mr. Lee are celebrities whose commercial value increased from the publicity resulting from the availability of the tape, this does not necessarily mean that it is ethical to: a) display the images or b) watch them.

It is thus the purpose of my essay to try to advocate a position against pornography from a theoretical center that differs from what I consider to be Williams’ radical, liberationist agenda. I do not advocate the censoring of film images of people having sex, and certainly do not believe the academic work being done about these images is unworthy. My position instead wants to argue for an ethical stance which worries about the social effects of publicizing these images. As a film critic, I parse cinematic representations into those that I find dangerous to our well-being, and write articles against them, and those that I find edifying (and write articles promoting them). I see nothing in pornographic films that would make me want to do the latter.

I certainly do not speak as an authority on pornographic cinema. When I read *Hard Core* for the first time in preparation for the panel discussion, I watched *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972), largely due to the cultural status it was gaining with the release of the documentary, *Inside Deep Throat* (Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, 2005). I found the film horrifying. The moment when the man pours Coke into Linda Lovelace’s vagina in order to drink the resulting juices from a straw made me shut the film off. It took quite some time before I could resume watching it. The existence of this film, I think, does not bode well for the future of our civilization.

I believe it is fully possible to voice this opinion without replicating the moral outrage against pornography that characterizes both the radical Right and the anti-pornography feminist Left. I do not advocate banning the film, indeed I think everyone

should see it; I instead want to build a centrist consensus of shame that would make us question whether we want to live in a culture in which people think watching a man drink out of his partner's vagina is anything other than disgusting.

I do not have any problem with this as a private sex act. If two consenting adults find this stimulating, I celebrate their happiness. Instead, I dispute this as an appropriate event in the public space. We have a right, and indeed a duty, to police the public space. I do not want images which degrade women in this way polluting my public space, and it is my obligation to speak out against them.

The Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee home movie is of interest to me as a cultural event—certainly not as a text I want to study—because it offers a nexus for the representation of a couple who do loving things together, including having sex. The mere public acknowledgement of the tape is a violation of that couple's love. One can cynically suggest that they are celebrities, and profit off of their own exploitation, but I have no data to indicate that they deliberately orchestrated the event. They insist that they did not. Before I am comfortable with the public punishment of people, I want to know they are guilty of something. The public record indicates that they are guilty of making a private home movie of their vacation, which included their sex life, and nothing more.

Intriguingly, the videotape is now also at the center of the controversy over Sacha Baron Cohen's film, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of American for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Larry Charles, 2006). The film's plot involves fictional Kazakhstan television personality Borat traveling from New York to Los Angeles in order to get to meet Pamela Anderson, with whom he has comically fallen in love. Borat meets up with a group of drunken fraternity brothers in an RV. In the midst of their sexist

jabbering, the buffoons show Borat the Pamela and Tommy sex video, which crushes the Kazakh's illusions of her virginity. The men are now suing because the film's producers allegedly took them out drinking before shooting this section of the film, purportedly to increase its cringe-worthiness. They claim that they are unfairly represented in the film as sexist louts because of their drunken state. For me the point is moot, as their celebratory screening of the tape reveals their sexism unequivocally.

II. Pornography as Reading Frame: *Open Water* as a Couple's Video

I want to take the analysis of the Pamela and Tommy video footage by Kleinhans and Hillyer as representative of pornography studies. Against this, I want to propose a very different video as my site for doing cultural analysis. In fact, I want to go further than this, and offer *Open Water* as an example of anti-pornography. I use this term, not in the sense that Andrea Dworkin authors an anti-pornography feminism, but instead as a marker of generic practice. My colleague Susan Kollin discusses films like *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995) as "anti-Westerns," an attempt to suggest that certain genre films so deform their predecessors that they forward auto-critiques of the very genre of which they are a part.

In my own teaching, I came to this position regarding the films *Sweet Sweetback's Baaadasssss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1970) and *Ganja and Hess* (Bill Gunn, 1973). In my lectures on these films, I call them "anti-Blaxploitation films," trying to assert that some of the films using generic revisionism within African-American cinema of the early 1970s deliberately emptied Hollywood genre films of their racist content. Thus, *Ganja and Hess* offers a critique of a rich black man's predation on the black underclass. His

vampirism—he feeds on the blood of the residents of Harlem, and then returns to his mansion in West Chester in his Rolls Royce—thus serves as a metaphor against race and class discrimination. While a film like *Blacula* (William Craig, 1972) is a Blaxploitation film—using the Hollywood vampire generic tradition to make money off of urban viewers—*Ganja and Hess* is in every way its opposite, an anti-blaxploitation film.

In this sense, I believe *Open Water* is an example of anti-pornography. Like the Pamela and Tommy video, it is a “couple’s video,” a study of the intimate contact between two lovers. I first invented this position before I knew anything about pornography, while watching *Open Water* on the night of its premiere. I went to the film—about a couple who gets left behind in the open ocean while on a morning-long diving expedition in the Caribbean—because my work in film studies involves the intertextual analysis of contemporary American cinema. From its publicity, *Open Water* seemed to be an updated version of *Jaws* (Stephen Spielberg, 1975), an important New Hollywood horror film also about a shark attack.

Kentis’ film begins with Daniel (Daniel Travis) putting some luggage into his car. Meanwhile, his wife, Susan (Blanchard Ryan), is inside their house finalizing a Hollywood production deal which she is brokering. The early shots of the film suffer from the terrible colors and washed-out look of digital video. My first thought was that this looked like a contemporary, straight-to-video porn movie. While there were certainly other films released to mainstream theaters before *Open Water* that relied on this ugly-looking video aesthetic—*The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999) perhaps being its iconic source—there was a particular combination of the look of the image, the clipped dialogue of bad actors delivering their stagy lines, and the blandly

traditional good looks of these actors (Travis has a generically handsome face, Ryan is blonde and buxom), that made me feel like they were suddenly going to start stripping off their clothes and go at it, accompanied by the 1970s synthesizer beats so familiar to us all.

Of all the film's popular reviewers, only Dennis Lim connected these aesthetics to pornography:

As if to justify the scenario's inherent sadism, neither protagonist elicits much sympathy (or indeed any pang of annoyance). The combination of unflattering videography and tan, buff, blandly attractive actors mouthing stilted dialogue gives the opening scenes a curious porn-like quality. (Even later, as they're helplessly adrift, you half expect the couple to wash up on Temptation Island).

Lim and I, as well as most of the other commentators on the film, have noticed the same thing: the film's aesthetics are comprised of banal settings, a nondescript acting style, and cheap video production values. As Lim correctly observes, the primary aesthetic referent for this form of filmmaking is pornography. However, what for Lim was a negative—pornography serves as the marker of uninteresting characterization—for me produced a remarkably tension-filled spectatorial experience.

I want to suggest that the ability to read *Open Water* in contact with pornography is not so much a generic question but one of reception. That is, I want to use pornography not as the genre category so well studied by Linda Williams in *Hard Core*, but as a reading frame. If one keeps thinking about pornography while watching a non-pornographic film, what is the resulting interpretation? I believe this notion could be highly productive for advancing the discipline of film criticism. What makes criticism important is that it allows us to see familiar films in a new light. I believe genre

categories could be deployed much more aggressively than they have previously been to do just that.

Robin Wood's essay, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," about the ideological complexities of Hollywood genre films offers the seminal methodology for such a project. For example, Wood studies how George Bailey's noir nightmare vision reframes our interpretation of the small town comedy, *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). However, because of its interest in the relationship between pornography, horror, and melodrama, it is Linda Williams' essay, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," first published in *Film Quarterly* in 1991, which inspires my method here. Williams observes that she goes to films to receive a bodily effect, to be aroused by pornography, to be scared by horror films, to cry at melodramas, and to laugh at comedies. In this way, Williams brilliantly links spectatorial effects (while she uses psychoanalysis, the recent fad in film studies has been to think about cognition) with textual features (genre categories). Implicit in this model is that the desire to experience emotional effects might not be contained by genre address. In "Never Laugh at a Man with His Pants Down," Nina K. Martin emphasizes the relationship between comedy and pornography, an essay partly inspired by Peter Lehman's work on the parodic relationship between the porn industry and mainstream Hollywood, as presented in his essay, "Twin Cheeks, Twin Peeks, and Twin Freaks."

I merely want to go one step further, to argue, whether willfully against-the-grain, or with textual support, that we can spectatorially hop across generic boundaries to re-value the film we are watching. I believe this is exactly what I did when I began obsessing about *Open Water* as a kind of porn film. Beyond this, the first half of Kentis'

film is an absolutely brilliant couple's melodrama, detailing with few words but beautiful character tensions, the collapse of Daniel's and Susan's marriage.

We learn that they have been desperately trying to go on vacation to save the marriage, but Susan's career choices have impeded Daniel's attempt to schedule a wonderful experience for them. Thus, at the last minute, they have to settle upon substandard accommodations to go diving in the Caribbean. They accept this less-than-ideal vacation rather than let their marriage crumble without a fight.

After settling into their motel room the day before the dive, Susan, still in L.A. mode, worries that their diving boat will be too crowded: "I hope it's not a cattle boat." Daniel re-assures her: "We'll just do our own thing." Susan complains that it is too hot in the room. Daniel explains that it is because the air conditioner is broken. Susan tries to help out with the marital therapy: "I'm not complaining." Daniel has his own brand of couple's counseling; he tells the truth: "Yes, you are." Susan lets the remark slide, even helping their marital healing by refusing to check her e-mail: "I'm on vacation, remember?"

They get out of the room and experience a romantic stroll around the island's quaint tourist shops. They drink juice straight out of a fresh piece of fruit. They walk by a "little sipper" kitsch souvenir, complete with a ceramic nipple on the side of the cup. Susan takes Daniel's photograph while his head is inside a fake shark's mouth. In this way, the film sets up two generic expectations. The erotic mug suggests a growing sexual intimacy, certainly the stuff of melodrama, if not pornography. Daniel's head in the shark offers the gloomier one, foreshadowing the latter half of the film's genre status, horror.

This sequence ends with an all-too-obvious cliché: they walk together in an extreme long shot along the beach at sunset.

Seven minutes into the movie, an image narratively displays their crumbling marriage with precision. I have no idea what the domestic scenes which dominate the Pamela and Tommy video are (that is, the 42 minutes of non-sexual material that pads out the experience), but were it a piece of art, it would consist of such scenes. Shortly before going to bed, Daniel and Susan brush their teeth together in the motel room's cramped bathroom. It is a great scene, one which, without words, tells us all we need to know about: a) their intimacy with each other, and b) why their marriage is in a state of free-fall.

The scene is film art at its most profound, using images to convey emotional states with precision and eloquence. As they brush their teeth, Susan dips her head in front of Daniel. He has to wait to spit out the toothpaste from his mouth. In the brief moment he is delayed, he gives an eye roll of annoyance that conveys everything we need to know. She has demonstrated no concern for him, hogging the sink at her convenience. He is annoyed by her behavior, but does not say anything. That is to say, they have a "normal" marriage, but one which demonstrates that the inability to communicate about these minor annoyances will be their undoing. In a melodrama, their marriage would be destroyed by large stressors: In *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), Stella and Steve Dallas cannot agree on how to raise their child, nor can Ted and Joanna Kramer in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robbie Benson, 1979). However, in this horror film, the marriage will crumble around the hyperbolic stress produced by having to survive all alone in a shark-infested ocean.

Before that, however, Kentis shock cuts from the toothpaste scene to an image of Susan lying naked in bed on the top of the sheets, reading a magazine. She is voluptuous and beautiful, her firm breasts beckoning to her husband. At this moment, I expected my pornographic imagination to be satiated. The fact that the film refuses to deliver on its teasing promise is what convinces me that *Open Water* is, if anything, anti-pornographic. If ever this dysfunctional couple were going to have sex, it would be at this moment. They have just spent a romantic afternoon together, playing and relaxing, on a tropical island. Even, Susan, the workaholic, is finally relaxing, refusing to worry about her work back home, something that has been causing the marriage undue stress in L.A. Daniel climbs into bed. They kiss, and everything seems primed for the porn scene the digital video aesthetic has demanded from the opening images at home.

However, Susan is wearing some cold cream on her face, so she turns out the light. Daniel, undeterred, kisses Susan again. She hugs him, laughing. "Nice face," she jokes, seeing some of the white material stuck to his nose. "You too," he observes. "Yeah, but I'm a girl," she explains. Susan begins talking about how stressed she feels because of her job. "Maybe I can get you to think about something else," Daniel reasons seductively. He tries to initiate sex, but she resists. When Daniel asks if Susan is OK, she replies that she is not in the mood. Frustrated, Daniel observes, "Felt like you might be a second ago." He desperately tries again: "I'll give you a little nudge." Susan confirms her lack of interest: "Yeah, I'm not in the mood." Daniel laments, "That wasn't the direction I was trying to nudge you in." Susan tries to placate him: "We can talk." Not a good sign for the marriage, Daniel turns away from her, "No. We should get some sleep. I'm wiped."

Next, Daniel and Susan are awakened in the middle of the night by an annoying, tropical flying insect. In a remarkable use of a wide-angle lens to distort the visual space as much as their marriage is distorted by their emotional distance, Daniel kneels on the bed attempting to swat the bug while Susan lies in the bed, cocooned in a white sheet. Here, the cheap aesthetics of porn to maximize the visual clarity of the sex act is replaced by an artistic use of digital video to thematically explore human relationships.

The next we see Daniel and Susan, their bodies are packed into wet suits. Once they dive into the water, they will forever be stuck in these second skins. Thus, any potential the film had for representing sex acts or indeed any form of physical intimacy is forever curtailed. Instead, the horror components of the film come to override these pornographic ones. What remains consistent is the melodramatics of their experience. As the shark attacks become more frequent, they become angrier with each other, heaping blame upon the partner for the dire predicament they are in.

The anti-pornography genre status of *Open Water* helps clarify the film's importance in understanding contemporary Hollywood filmmaking. *Open Water* is perhaps the most highly visible follow-up to *The Blair Witch Project*, whose phenomenal box office gross in proportion to its low production costs was clearly the inspiration for Chris Kentis and Laura Lau, the husband and wife filmmakers, to shoot during their vacations from their "real" jobs while in the Caribbean. In his study of *The Blair Witch Project* in Jon Lewis' *The End of Cinema*, Eric S. Mallin argues that the prior film can best be understood in intertextual dialogue with William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Mallin argues that the film is built out of a series of "aporias of horror" (108). What replaces the missing horror then occupies the film's focus: human reactions to terrifying situations.

For example, Mallin argues that one character “is filmed washing her hands maniacally... a visual recollection of Lady Macbeth’s renowned ‘out, damn’d spot’ sleepwalking sequence” (114fn4). The terms Mallin uses to describe his intertextual analysis of *The Blair Witch Project*—“analogy,” “haunt,” and “echo” (106)—dovetail with my approach to *Open Water*, not only on institutional grounds, but also on interpretive ones. *Open Water* foregrounds the “aporia of pornography,” refusing to represent the sex act, despite echoing that generic form in its cheap digital video aesthetic and its flat acting.

Once leaving behind Daniel’s and Susan’s dysfunctional bedroom, *Open Water* focuses on their emotional state, abandoned in the water. At first, they try to be civil to one another, but the petty annoyances persist. When the water warms temporarily, Susan notices that Daniel has urinated without warning her. They try to play a game, six degrees of separation, in order to pass the time until they are rescued, but a jellyfish stings her on the leg. Susan begins crying, and Daniel assures her that they are going to get through this ordeal.

Daniel begins drifting away from Susan. She screams for him to stay close to her, which he does. She begins getting nauseous from the rocking of the ocean water. At 4:40pm, about 45 minutes into the film, the sharks begin attacking. Daniel has been sleeping, but when she screams, he wakes up and utters her name for the first time in the film, in a panic. He swims over and reunites with her.

Susan begins complaining of a pain in her leg. Daniel submerges to see more clearly. He spots a small tear in her wet suit. Suddenly, the water gets cloudy. As he surfaces, she apologizes to him for having thrown up on his head. Daniel holds her in his arms. This exposure of repressed bodily fluids offers an intense contrast with

pornography. While semen and spit are allowed, because they enhance and confirm sexual pleasure, other bodily fluids, like urine, feces and menses are generally not shown. *Open Water* establishes its status as anti-pornography by demonstrating the intimacy of a truly loving couple. I can not think of a more intimate moment than holding my wife's hair while she vomits, a precious form of loving privacy which is rarely displayed in the cinema.

However, immediately after this hope for their reconciliation, the film displays the effects the trauma has on their already crumbled marriage. Daniel begins screaming suddenly: "This is totally un-fucking-believable. We paid those incompetent fuckers to drop us in the middle of the ocean. Those fuckers!" He screams again. Susan, clearly upset, asks him if he feels better because, "You're not the only one stuck out here." Daniel responds angrily, "Fine, you be mad." Susan stops talking to him. Daniel is all too familiar with this dysfunctional non-communication: "So, now we've entered the no talking phase." He understands that Susan now blames him for the mess they are in: "Has this somehow over the hours become my fault?" Susan demands that they "just drop it."

At this point, Susan explodes in an orgy of blame. She accuses him of not surfacing in time: "Why do you always have to cut it so close?" She attacks his anti-social behavior: "Couldn't we just once stay with the group?" She blames him for not having been more aggressive immediately after they discovered they were abandoned: "You refused to swim. My God, there were boats all around us and you refused to swim." Finally, Susan says that she never even wanted to come on the trip: "I wanted to go skiing." In this way, all of the repressed tensions in their marriage finally come to the communicative fore, under the threat of the imminent shark attacks, which constitute the

remainder of the film. The sharks become an allegorical force for the attack on Daniel and Susan's bodies, a metaphorical pornography in which the deterioration of the bodies due to the phallic strikes from the sharks gives voice to their collapsing marriage.

In this sense, I believe *Open Water* to be open to a reading which positions the film as an experimental study of the collapse of Daniel and Susan's marriage. While they do both die at the end of the film, I think the point is that, as a fictionally-created couple about whom we care, they died back on land, in the sex scene that never was. If pornography is a genre in which human intimacy is replaced by physical acts of sex (no characterization, no dialogue, just "fucking"), then *Open Water* is its opposite. On land, the film sets up their impending physical intimacy. In the water, such intimacy is actually physically impossible. Instead, all that is left is for them to learn to express their hatred for one another as they die. Whether this death is from sharks or not is completely immaterial.

When students ask me what to make films about, I always respond with the phrase, "characters in a box." That is, films are best when they explore human emotions. To accomplish this sort of cinema, one needs people, and little else. My ideal film about marriage, therefore, would consist of a blank stage with two people, confined in a box. The confinement would force them to come to terms with their relationship to one another. They could learn that they love each other, and kiss; they could discover that they hate each other, and punch; or they could come to realize they have nothing in common with each other, and turn their backs. On the stage, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a real-life example of this experimental narrative. Vladimir and Estragon

come to realize that all they have is each other, so they continue to talk for all eternity; in sum, it is a beautiful love story.

Open Water is this kind of experimental film in a box. For much of the film's final hour, Susan and Daniel merely float in an empty sea, with nothing to do but sleep, bicker at one another, and die from shark bites. At dawn the next morning, Susan realizes Daniel is dead. She pats him on the head, gently kisses him, cries, and lets him drift away. At 8:55am, rescue boats are dispatched to try to find the missing divers. However, Susan, all alone, gives up hope. She is forced to turn her head away as sharks strike at what is left of Daniel's corpse, pulling his body under the water. Hundreds of sharks lunge at the meat. Kentis cuts to a close-up of Susan. She strips off her oxygen tanks, which have been holding her afloat, and calmly sinks into the water, killing herself.

As realism, the ending leaves something to be desired. At the opening-night screening I attended, the auditorium was packed with tense viewers who were clearly, along with me, squirming in their seats as Susan's and Daniel's time in the water went on hour after hour. However, as the credits rolled and people began to leave the theatre, some were vocally upset about the ending. I imagine this partially has to do with the unfulfilled desire for Susan's rescue. The plot of the film is based on a true story, in which both divers died, and thus perhaps justifies this narrative choice. However, if one accepts at all the legitimacy of my reading frame, then something else is going on here.

Up until now, I have argued against the grain of the libertinism of pornography studies, forwarding the enabling aspects of *Open Water*'s status as anti-pornography, its interest in dissecting the human communicative frailties of a young couple. Anti-pornography could, of course, mean something very different, the representation of an

esthetic world in which bodily sexuality is not allowed. It is remarkable that *Open Water*, a film about a beautiful young couple on vacation in the Caribbean, is so sexless.

If that is in fact the point, which I believe it to be, then when the sharks come, as a kind of return of the repressed of the body, they dissect the couple in a different way. The attack on their dysfunctional, sexless bodies not only exacerbates their marital difficulties, it also kills their relationship. When all possibility of bodily pleasure is extinguished by the sharks' fatal attack on Daniel, Susan's only choice is to forego her bodily existence as well. In the modernist terms I have detailed below, if Vladimir never returns from one of his forays off stage, the love story of *Waiting for Godot* collapses, and the hanging himself on the bare tree, much discussed in the play, would indeed become Estragon's only viable choice.

The generic categories that I have been using to parse Susan's decision at the end of *Open Water* speak to the broad possibilities for activating fresh genre criticism of the film. In addition to modernism and pornography, I would like to consider another body genre reading possibility. After all, the generic force that motivated me to see *Open Water* in the first place is horror, and can be best illuminated via the film's intertextual relationship to *Jaws*. While Kentis' take on this material does all that it can to distance his method from Spielberg's blockbuster (the digital video rather than beautiful 35mm film, the use of actors of considerably less skilled than Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw, etc.), the pornography reading frame, and the resultant feminist political implications, bring us right back to Spielberg's 1975 text. *Jaws* begins with a rape scene. Chrissy, a young woman at a beach party, strips her clothes off and runs to the ocean, followed in hot pursuit by a young man who has been staring at her around the fire. When

she completely disrobes and jumps into the water, the young man screams, “I’m definitely coming.”

As Chrissy is brutally attacked by the shark, visualized by a shot from the shark’s phallic point-of-view up between Chrissy’s naked legs (in a shot immortalized by the film’s one-sheet advertising poster), the tenor of the scene changes drastically. She screams, “it hurts” and “please, stop,” while gurgling in obvious pain. Back on the beach, the would-be paramour continues to mumble, “I’m coming.” When students pressure me to convince them that the scene is not really about a shark attack, but instead allegorically a rape, I play the scene again with the lens cap on the projector. With sound only, the status of the scene as a representation of rape is unequivocal. The visual distance between the shark and the young man is dissolved, directly relating Chrissy’s screams of pain to the young man’s salacious declarations that he’s “coming.”

The collision between acts of rape and pornography, one of the clear agendas of 1970s radical feminism, is brought into focus by film studies’ responses to such images. In a forceful essay, Jane Chance uses radical feminist theory to detail *Jaws*’ sexism, suggesting that the film expresses deep-seated and mythological patriarchal fears of the feminine. For this reason, the film banishes its women in a cycle of violence that spans the first act of the narrative. Chrissy is brutally murdered by the shark as the film’s catalyst, and at the first turning point, Mrs. Brody runs away in horror from her husband as Quint, his shark-hunting colleague, sings sexist sea ditties about “bow-legged women... losing their virginity.” No women appear in the last two acts of the film. Mrs. Brodie tries radioing her husband in the second act, but Quint smashes the device in the middle of their conversation.

Jaws' structure as a horror film—a series of murders by an unseen monster—predicts the cycle of slasher films from the late 1970s and early 1980s, perhaps most clearly inaugurated by *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978). Those slasher films, of course, are the site of a subsequent version of post-structural feminism, Carol Clover's masterful study, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, which defend these films because of their figuration of the Final Girl, a woman who is empowered to fight the monster. By banishing its women characters, *Jaws* possesses the sexist structure of the slasher film, but denies its feminist redemption via Clover's Final Girl. *Open Water*, for its part, while not a slasher film, does resolve with Susan as the last woman swimming, and although she does not triumph over the monsters as does the Final Girl, she does, as I argued above, possess discursive control over her own death. While Chrissy dies at the hands of the shark's phallic teeth, accompanied on the soundtrack by the boy's "coming," and a porn film builds to the witnessing of male ejaculation, Susan dies a quiet death. In short, *Open Water* is an anti-porn film because it has the good sense to deny its spectators the "money shot," refusing to show us the violent or sexual fruition of the horror and porn genres, respectively.

III. Conclusion

In Linda Williams' terms, *Open Water* is a body genre film, a horror spectacle whose purpose is to elicit fear in its viewers. Popular reviewers split with remarkably forceful Manicheanism regarding its success as such. In *The Village Voice*, Dennis Lim articulates the negative view: "*Open Water* is simply a stunt—hopelessly literal-minded and cheap in every sense." I hope to have demonstrated, by using a pornographic reading frame,

that, even if the film is literal-minded, the spectator need not be. The reviewers who defend the film emphasize, not its pornographic effects, but certainly its visceral force, its status as body genre artifact. Roger Ebert enthused, “Rarely, but sometimes, a movie can have an actual physical effect on you... Chris Kentis tells its story with a direct simplicity that is more harrowing than any fancy stuff could possibly be.”

Such reviewers, while mostly fixated upon the horror aspects of the bodily effect of the film, interestingly stray toward other generic categories, leading me to conclude that the ultimate force of Williams’ exquisite essay lies not in its status as a genre studies text, but as pointing the way toward a reception studies method. Ebert invokes comedy—“their situation becomes a vast dark cosmic joke”—as does A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*. In discussing the marital fight scene late in the film, Scott describes Susan and Daniel as “spit[ting] the clichés of modern couplehood,” and concludes that “you can’t help but laugh.”

In my essay, I have attempted—for reasons of engaging in a minor dissent with pornography studies as it is emerging—to connect *Open Water* with a different body genre. No pornography scholar would consider writing about *Open Water* as a porn film when this burgeoning discipline has many films previously ignored about which it is desperately important to write. But I think it crucial, even at the earliest stages of the formation of a method and focus in pornography studies, to ask questions about how the discipline might relate to the larger project of film studies. I remain deeply committed to discussing films that I find aesthetically, narratively, and ideologically worthwhile. While I have no interest in designating the domain of other people’s work—I find, for example, Minette Hillyer’s analysis of a videotape I would resolutely never want to see, completely

fascinating as a worthwhile articulation of cultural studies—but it is at least worth considering that not much of what is defined as pornography is ever going to attract my attention.

Williams defends her edited volume, *Porn Studies* with the following rationale: “This volume tries to help the teacher and student of pornography roll up their sleeves to begin work in this field rather than to pose the genre as the limit case of cultural analysis—the thing about which there is really nothing to say” (5). I offer this essay as a defense of that which Williams critiques. I have absolutely, and without reservations, used pornography, the video of Pamela and Tommy having sex which I have willfully not seen, as the limit case against which I analyze *Open Water*. I disagree with Williams’ reductionist rationale for why pornography might be to some a thing about which there is nothing to say. While authoring a position that I do not wish to be misconstrued as prudish, I am trying to suggest that it might be possible to find a centrist position which certainly does not want to censor pornography, but at the same time has better things to do than glorify it.

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