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“The Cold War’s “undigested apple-dumpling”: Imaging *Moby-Dick* in 1956 and 2001”

By Walter Metz

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On September 10, 2001, I was writing the following as a chapter in my book project about canonical novels adapted into Cold War American films: In *Approaches to Teaching Moby-Dick*, one of a series of pedagogically-oriented Modern Language Association books on classic literature, Martin Bickman makes the following claim about the 1956 Hollywood film version of Melville’s mid-19th century novel, directed by John Huston:

There is widespread agreement. . . that the 1956 Warner Brothers film of *Moby-Dick*, casting Gregory Peck as Ahab and something like the Goodyear Blimp as the whale, is unsatisfying. Milton R. Stern, however, ingeniously shows in ‘The Whale and the Minnow: *Moby-Dick* and the Movies’ how a comparison of the film with the book can highlight the nature and strengths of the latter. (15)

As much of my previous work on film adaptation has shown—for example, my defense of Martin Ritt’s 1959 melodramatic film version of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*--the elitist assumptions imbedded in such a knee-jerk critical assault on Hollywood films needs to be challenged.¹ This paper proposes to question the “widespread agreement” that the only things to be said about Huston’s film version of *Moby-Dick* are that it is obviously inferior to Melville’s original and that it sports a rubbery special effects whale.

To pursue such a project, I will explore a set of critical approaches to Melville’s novel that center on the 1950s as a crisis point in *Moby-Dick* criticism. In particular, this critical strand centers on the New Historicism’s assault on accepted notions of the meanings of the key texts of the American Renaissance. Led by “New Americanist” Donald Pease, this criticism has suggested that the increased

¹ My publications on film adaptation taking this critical approach include: "Signifying Nothing?: Martin Ritt’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1959) as Deconstructive Adaptation," *Literature/Film Quarterly* (72.1 [1999]. 21-31); "'Another being we have created called us': Point-of-view, Melancholia, and the Joking Unconscious in *The Bridges of Madison County*," *The Velvet Light Trap* (39 [Spring 1997]. 66-83); and "Pomp(ous) Sirk-umstance: Intertextuality, Adaptation, and *All That Heaven Allows*," *Journal of Film and Video* (45.4 [Winter 1993]. 3-21).

attention to *Moby-Dick* in post-World War II America was driven by Cold War ideology. By reading F.O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance* as expressive of these ideological concerns, Pease argues, in his essay, "*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War," that Melville's novel was appropriated during the Cold War as a direct expression of a simplistic battle of good and evil, between an Ishmael who allegorically codes for freedom and a totalitarian Ahab. Of course, more generalized studies of the Cold War critical establishment's ideologically-driven readings of canonical literature have situated the *Moby-Dick* case within a larger paradigm. Geraldine Murphy's "Romancing the Center: Cold War Politics and Classic American Literature" is one such case in point.

This paper will use such criticism as a methodology for interrogating John Huston's film as a critical act, engaging with the Cold War assumptions as to the meaning and scope of Melville's *Moby-Dick* as it would have been understood circa 1956. First and foremost, such criticism pushes the apocalyptic components of Melville's novel to the foreground. A novel that uses the Pequod as a microcosm of American diversity—in terms of class and race—ends with the destruction of that symbol. Furthermore, as Lakshmi Mani proposes in *The Apocalyptic Vision in Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Melville's apocalyptic ending relies on the vast ocean as the site of imperialist conquest and its failure, an ocean that clearly resonates with Pacific atomic bomb testing prevalent in the American consciousness of the 1950s. Thus, when Pease suggests, "That final cataclysmic image of total destruction motivated Matthiessen and forty years of Cold War critics to turn to Ishmael, who in surviving must, the logic would have it, have survived as the principle of America's freedom and who hands over to us our surviving heritage," it can be made resonant with Huston's film's Cold War activation of Richard Basehart-as-Ishmael's ideological survival of the United States in its conflict with the Soviet Union.

Continuing with such top-down political readings of the film, one would observe that Melville's engagement with theories of leadership—contained in his examination of Ahab's ruination of the "ship of state" and its resonance with Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, for example—would be

pertinent for a film made at the moment of Dwight Eisenhower's 1956 defeat of Adlai Stevenson. Or even more intriguingly, Charles Olsen's 1947 study, *Call Me Ishmael*—in which *Moby-Dick* is read as an examination of the birth of the modern petroleum industry—establishes the film's political context in reference to the quest for energy resources which drove the Cold War nation's partitioning of the Third World.

But my focus will be on issues of identity politics, a bottom-up political analysis of race, class, and gender. Melville's liberal engagement of the friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg—"Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (24) or better yet "the truth is, these savages have an innate sense of delicacy, say what you will; it is marvelous how essentially polite they are" (27)—becomes the meat of Huston's liberal film version, in which Queequeg "politely" drowns in his coffin so as to allow the white protagonist Ishmael to thrive under the American freedom Pease referenced earlier. Like the other great triumvirate of searchers in 1956 Hollywood cinema—Ethan Edwards, Martin Pawley, and Scar—the motley crew of Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg form a "primer" for American race politics (to borrow Brian Henderson's term for his analysis of Ford's film as an allegory for the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court case). Ishmael benefits from the liberal consensus on race, bought with the blood of Queequeg the person of color, to defeat Ahab's rabid resistance to Cold War centrist politics.

Interestingly enough, political readings of the novel in this vein, when they do mention film intertexts, avoid the Huston film and instead reach toward other prominent 1950s films. For example, David Leverenz' "Class Conflicts in Teaching *Moby-Dick*" makes an intriguing connection between *Moby-Dick*'s politics of assimilation and those in Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958): "When Queequeg is overworked, he simply makes his coffin and lies in it. The coffin ultimately saves his white friend, not himself, like Sidney Poitier's self-sacrifice for Tony Curtis in *The Defiant Ones*" (93). While deeply appreciative of such intertextual criticism, I propose to return directly to the John Huston version of *Moby-Dick*, attempting to circumvent fidelity studies approaches to adaptation which a

priori assume that because Huston's film has a different project than Melville's novel in its original 19th Century context, it is therefore incompetent and unworthy of serious academic analysis.

Such was my project on September 10. The next morning, as I faced teaching my courses to a very different world, I had to decide whether to discuss the geopolitical mechanisms of American imperialism or William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, the scheduled material for the day. I ended up doing both, using Hamlet and Socrates as characters who serve as testaments to humanity's ability to *not* succumb to thoughtless, barbaric violence in response to thoughtless, barbaric violence. Hamlet's thinking-induced delays and Socrates' decision not to escape his own execution, rationalized via the mantra, "never repay an injustice with an injustice," got me through that day feeling as if my rhetorical intervention to my students fulfilled the university's mission of containing emotion within the force-field of reason.

I was confronted with how out of phase I am with my diabolically conservative culture, when on television that night, the former director of the CIA, one of a series of war-mongering images (not the least of whom was George Bush) CNN foisted upon me, declared that it was important in dealing with terrorism not to get caught in "a Hamlet syndrome," which I interpreted to mean, "drop bombs now, ask questions later," a horrifying containment of reason within the force-field of emotional hyperbole. Thus, the professor and the (Cold) warrior had in fact gathered the same data—that *Hamlet* is a pertinent intertext to September 11—but we had processed that data in completely antithetical terms.

I consider this evidence for a claim that Jacques Derrida made at the inauguration of Nuclear Criticism as a discipline at Johns Hopkins University in 1984: that literary analysts, not politicians or physicists, are the most qualified to theorize the nuclear apocalypse because of the threat it poses to the literary archive. In a similar way, the events of September 11—both the inhumanity of terrorism and the inhumanity of American imperialist response to it—produce a vacuum of the human that our field is uniquely positioned to rectify. The fact that we still care what happened to Socrates is a testament to

our ability to endure, not just as the animals that the terrorists showed us to be, but as the humans that we've suspected we might be able to evolve into.

One astonishing thing about September 11 is how surprised people seemed to be that terrorists would target the United States. This should not have been the case. In 1994, James Cameron's *True Lies*, a film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as Harry Tasker, an American family man who happens to work for the CIA's "Omega Sector" anti-terrorism unit, viciously defined Americans' hatred of Arabs, at least in their filmed entertainment. *True Lies* forwards an arrogant belief in white males' superiority over people of color. The film encourages its audience to cheer Harry's facile dispatching of scores of Arab terrorists. No matter where Harry shoots, Arabs die. In the film's most absurd moment, Harry reconciles with his estranged wife, Helen (played by Jamie Lee Curtis), kissing her in front of an atomic blast set off by the terrorists. Whereas in real life, such a blast would have caused many people living on the east coast of the United States to die of radiation poisoning, here Arab incompetence becomes a ripe moment for inconsequential romance.

The Arab terrorists' incompetent deployment of an atomic bomb off the coast of Florida is part of *True Lies*' systemic representational strategy that privileges the white American male as the master of high technology, in contrast with Arab people of color and their sheer incompetence with such gadgets. In a moment played for comedy, the Arabs attempt to record their terrorist mantra into a video camera, but fail when it runs out of batteries. On a totem pole of technological competence, Helen, a white woman, finds the middle ground, killing Arabs but only accidentally as she drops her machine gun down a flight of stairs.

This representational practice is horrifying because it replicates racist discourses of 19th century eugenics, proposing that white men were superior to white women who in turn were superior to men and women of color. After September 11, I am horrified to say that Americans now understand the legacy of this sort of racist arrogance, a position that supported the decimation of the Arab world in the

age of imperialism, and which supported *True Lies*' rise to blockbuster status. Arab terrorists may be horrifying, but they are anything but incompetent.

I thought about 1994's *True Lies* as I tried to tearfully explain to my three-year-old son, Alex, that the televisual images of planes crashing into the World Trade Center were not scenes from a movie. He didn't believe me, and still doesn't. I'm not sure I can blame him: the alien destruction of the Empire State Building in *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1995) looks awfully similar to what was aired on CNN in the weeks after September 11.

As George Bush delivered his war-mongering address the night of the tragedy, a far more profound horror struck me. As I envisioned the retaliatory strikes killing thousands more innocent civilians, this time in the Arab world, the subsequent acts of terrorism in response to my tax dollars at work, and the never-ending cycle of violence, it dawned on me that I had completely undervalued the cultural significance of the contemporary Hollywood action-adventure film. *True Lies* and *Independence Day* were not merely films about identity politics, they in fact were serving a very specific function: to prepare Americans for the events of September 11 and their aftermath via a nefarious sort of brainwashing.

In these films, the terrorist and/or alien attacks happen relatively early. The anger generated by seeing our national landmarks obliterated then demands a formulaic response, centering on American pluckiness and its eventual triumph, to which the bulk of the movies are then dedicated. In *True Lies*, in a creepy form of before-the-fact catharsis for September 11, Harry commandeers a jet and blows the Arab terrorists out of the skyscraper in which they are hiding. In *Independence Day*, black (Will Smith) and Jewish (Jeff Goldblum) men use American technological know-how to give the aliens a fatal computer virus.

For the sake of my children's future, I desperately believe we need to see how these films have programmed this nation's response to Bush's call for "Gulf of Tonkin" force against the Arab world. As September 11 indicated, *True Lies*' basic premise about Arab terrorist incompetence was

completely false. What makes us think that action cinema's facile solution—Americans get angry and kick ass—will be any more accurate?

Socrates argued for reason over emotion, even as he was about to be put to death. Let's pause and consider the most rational course of action. Let's consider what America's role has been in the perpetuation of poverty and injustice in the Arab world. After such difficult soul-searching, let our actions leave a world to Alex that has broken the chain of violence that was continued—but not begun—on September 11, 2001.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* offers another such testament to the power of ideas to guide us in our response to September 11. After all, what is *True Lies*' Harry if not a modern-day Ahab who defeats his whale, the vilified Arab terrorists who "task" him? Melville's bitter warning about Ahab as a Romantic hero who doesn't win is a textual template that we'd do well to consider when constructing arguments about the United States' potential course of action over the coming years. For in truth, *George Bush* is also Captain Ahab, hell bent on avenging the loss of his buildings, New York City's legs, if you will.

If ever there was good evidence for a political unconscious in the novel, it would be the imagined headlines about Ishmael's life presented in the first chapter, "Loomings": "Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States," "Whaling Voyage by one Ishmael," and "Bloody Battle in Affghanistan" (7), indicating if nothing else, the long-standing historical trauma that the Afghanis have had to endure. For the Afghanis suffering Bush's bombs, the distinctions between 1850 and 2001 that motivate my historical study do not pertain in the least.

The pertinence of this intertextual analysis of the Cold War's *Moby-Dick* as articulated in John Huston's film version can be seen most directly, perhaps, in the recent 1998 USA Network television production. This version, starring Patrick Stewart as Ahab, does not topple Huston's film's Cold War interpretation as we might hope a Post-Cold War production would, but instead *perpetuates* it by replacing Orson Welles as Rev. Mapple with Gregory Peck, he who played 1956's Ahab. In *The*

Errant Art of Moby Dick, William Spanos argues for what is at stake here: “Pease’s enabling contribution to the struggle to free Melville—indeed, American literature at large—from the bondage of American Cold War discourse is precisely his decisive displacement of the question of its contemporary intelligibility from the domain of the sovereign subject to that of hegemony” (274).

For precisely this reason, I believe that to effectively discuss *Moby-Dick* in light of September 11, we must image the novel in ways that do not perpetuate, but instead transcend, its Cold War canonical reading. To do so, I want to focus on the identity political position from my earlier, now abandoned, project that I have not as yet breeched, namely questions of gender. I’ve chosen an extremely unlikely starting-place, Chris Carter’s sci-fi television show, *The X-Files*. There’s a terrific moment in Season 3, in the episode, “Quagmire,” first aired on May 3, 1996, when agents Mulder and Scully, having been on a case to catch a Loch Ness-style watery monster, have endured the sinking of their boat.

Stranded on a rock in the middle of a lake, Scully compares Mulder to Ahab, arguing that they both maniacally pursue some abstract and ultimately destructive paranoia that they label “Truth.” If Mulder is Ahab, then who is Scully? There’s a psychoanalytic possibility: Scully tells Mulder that her father used to call her Starbuck and she called him Ahab. Thus, Scully’s dead father, much a source of trauma in the first season of the show, as he never approved of her becoming an FBI agent instead of a doctor, has been replaced by Mulder, her will-they-or-won’t-they romantic foil, a position sealed by a season-ending episode in which Mulder and Scully kiss, having formed a “normal” family complete with new-born infant.

This line of reasoning would position Scully as Ahab’s lover, a possibility that would seem all but ludicrous if not for the astonishing pre-Cold War film version of Melville’s novel, made in 1930 by Warner Bros. as a star vehicle for John Barrymore. In this film, perhaps the most interesting adaptation I’ve ever seen, there is no Ishmael. Yes, that’s right, the central character of the novel, Melville’s grand solution to his crisis of how to justify the after-the-fact narration of an apocalyptic

narrative, is left on the cutting room floor. Bacon's film doesn't give a whit for the canonical reading of Melville's novel, largely because such a reading, an artifact of the Cold War, had not yet been articulated. Instead, Bacon's film produces a conventional Hollywood love story between Ahab and Faith, the invented daughter of Rev. Mapple, whose moral purity reforms Ahab from a bawdy sailor into a marriageable man. Being a pre-Production Code affair, the film is fairly aggressive about representing this transformation from sexual scoundrel to family man.

Once she has reformed him, Faith agrees to wait to marry Ahab when he returns from his next three-year whaling voyage. However, when Ahab's leg is bitten off by *Moby-Dick* (in a *very* funny scene thanks to an equally rubbery special effects whale), Ahab's brother tricks him into thinking Faith no longer desires him because of his handicap. Bitter at *Moby-Dick* for ruining his sex life, Ahab relentlessly pursues the whale, seeking vengeance. However, this time, Ahab wins. The men carve up *Moby-Dick*, return to New Haven, and Ahab marries Faith.

My point here is to entertain the possibility that to seek out the contemporary significance of a classical novel, we must entertain the idea that the novel is extremely malleable. Given the confines of a canonical reading, there is no question that the 1930 version of *Moby-Dick* is horrendous. However, once we highlight the complex ideological terrain of the canonical reading that contains the text, in this case, that the novel's misogyny is to be found in its marginalization of female characters, we have a path to begin appreciating extremely, shall we say, aberrant film adaptations.

The 1930 version--not being beholden to the idea that *Moby-Dick* is a masterpiece that shouldn't be tampered with--produces a series of radical transformations of the novel. Sometimes these transformations seem absurd--the film focuses on the back story of Ahab, thus adding to what is already a 569 page novel. Thus, under no circumstances could a 75 minute film hope to capture any significant thematic content of the novel. However, the introduction of Faith allows for an examination of gender that the Cold War reading pushes to the sidelines.

In her article, “Melville at the Movies: New Images of *Moby-Dick*,” Susan Weiner pursues a similar gender studies agenda when she analyzes the references to *Moby-Dick* in Michael Lehmann’s teen-pic, *Heathers* (1988). *Heathers* focuses on J.D., an aptly initialed juvenile delinquent who helps the central character, Veronica murder off the popular girls in the school, all of whom are named Heather. Weiner argues of J.D., “This young rebel with a cause is the dark side of Veronica, just as Ahab was a buried part of Ishmael” (87). In this way, the radical approach of the 1930 film, by combining Ishmael, Melville’s narrator and central character, and Ahab into the one character of John Barrymore’s Ahab, while not palatable to the canonical Cold War reading of Ishmael as freedom and Ahab as totalitarian, dovetails with the post-Cold War *Moby-Dick* as it is begun to be formulated by *Heathers*.

The 1930 film and *Heathers*, unified not by their historical contexts but instead by their insistence on *not* being Cold War texts, in fact make many of the same adaptational moves, including imposing a happy ending, about which Weiner argues:

It is then that J.D. designs a plan for the annihilation of his society, an idea he finds in *Moby-Dick*. But *Heathers* rewrites the novel by offering a positive solution to the problem it poses. The good leader triumphs as Veronica kills J.D. and saves the school. Unlike Melville, this director changed his ending to stress optimism rather than nihilism. (87-88)

Victor Salva’s *Powder* (1995), about an impossibly white albino boy with Christ-like empathic powers, also extracts a happy ending out of *Moby-Dick*. Like in Melville’s novel, but not the 1930 film version, Powder, the sought-after white whale of Salva’s film, defeats his pursuers and ascends to heaven (as Melville’s whale descends triumphantly into his oceany depths). Like *Heathers*, Salva’s film directly invokes *Moby-Dick* as its primary literary intertext. When Jesse the social worker first goes down to the basement where Powder has been kept by his grandfather, she discovers that he has memorized Herman Melville’s novel. Powder quotes a passage from near the end of the novel, from Chapter 114, entitled “The Gilder”:

Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (492)

Obsessed with what he believes to be his impending death at the hands of the mad Romantic Ahab, Ishmael reflects upon all people's orphaned nature, curable only in death. Powder, Salva's film's white whale, reflects upon his own alienated position, as the representatives of "civilization" like the cruel neo-conservative deputy, Harley Duncan, his Ahab, penetrates his basement abode, his oceany depths.

To conclude, and to return to the larger political implications of my intertextual argument, I'd like to throw one more *Moby-Dick* film intertext into the tank, 1975's *Jaws*. In an interview with Steven Spielberg, the director relates that he and the producers had to fire one of the early screenwriters because he insisted on calling the shark from Peter Benchley's novel a whale. The irony of course is that the screenwriter was right, Benchley's novel is a sort of popular culture version of Melville's novel.

The political significance of this observation is best appreciated by turning our attention back to William Spanos. To conclude his book, Spanos compares Melville's novel to Michael Herr's Vietnam novel, *Dispatches*, suggesting that Melville's "errant art" lies in its ability to indict the American imperialist project in its infancy. Unfortunately, no one listened to Melville, and when they did, reconstructed his critique of imperialism into a Cold War defense of freedom. The legacy of this, Spanos argues, is the disastrous American experience in Vietnam.

I believe *Jaws* is a *Moby-Dick* film in this Cold War sense. It is a film that features a crazed sea captain, Quint, who relentlessly pursues his object to the point of apocalypse. Both his boat, the Orca, and he himself, like Ahab, are destroyed by the shark. Like Melville's novel as read by the Cold War critics, the representatives of normative American whiteness survive in the guise of Chief Brody and Hooper, Ishmaels in their own way.

In terms of gender, the marginalization of women in *Jaws* is deliberate and diabolical in a way never approached by *Moby-Dick*. For *Jaws* is a backlash film against the Women's Liberation Movement. A sexually active woman is the shark's first victim, predicting the narrative tradition of the slasher film for which *Jaws* is the prototype: one victim after the other dismembered by the monster. Chrissie's jog into the water is then answered at the end of the first act of the film, as Quint's sexist banter frightens Mrs. Brodie, the only other major female character in the film, away from the dock. Mrs. Brodie is literally banished from the film, forced to answer Chrissie's sexual advance into the water with a maternal retreat back to her children on shore. From this point onward, *Jaws* becomes a war film in which the grizzled sergeant, Quint, must train his recruits, the technologically-inclined but green "lieutenant" Hooper and the equally green grunt "private," Chief Brodie.

A reading of *Jaws* as a war film is illuminated by Spanos' reading of *Moby-Dick* as a text that resonates with the Vietnam War. For *Jaws*, released the same year as the fall of Saigon, is a film which proposes how America should have won the Vietnam War. While drinking one night on the boat, Quint tells the story of why he'll never put on a life jacket ever again: he was on the USS Indianapolis, the boat which delivered the atomic bomb at the end of World War II, but was then sunk by a Japanese submarine. Forced to fight off shark attacks day and night, Quint was one of the lucky survivors, as most of his buddies were eaten.

Like *Moby-Dick* before it, *Jaws* sets up a complex allegorical structure. When Chief Brody stuffs an oxygen tank down the shark's throat and uses his rifle to blow him up, *Jaws* is producing a multifaceted image. After Brodie blows up the shark, it sinks to the bottom of the ocean, looking distinctly like a sinking submarine. Thus, Brodie is able to avenge the shark's murder of his friend Quint, which is polysemically also revenge against the Japanese who traumatized him via his experience on the USS Indianapolis.

This collapse has frightening allegorical consequences on the 1975 context of *Jaws*. For if the use of the nuclear bomb at Hiroshima is celebrated by Quint ("We delivered the bomb... August

1945”), then the film’s positioning of Brodie’s lesson as doing the same to the shark means allegorically that the way to win Vietnam would be the reuse of similar atomic weaponry. Throughout the film, the shark is positioned as a Vietcong-like entity: skulking around an underwater jungle, unseen, ready to spring out at any unexpected moment. And after all, the beach is the safe place for Americans, both in Vietnam and in *Jaws*.

On the last page of Spanos’ book, he reflects on the significance of his study. He claims, “It is not, to extend a resonant motif in Michel Foucault, simply a genealogy, a ‘history of Melville’s present’: it is also a history of the American future, of the present historical occasion that we precariously inhabit” (278). Unfortunately, this paper concludes that George Bush as Ahab, the son of the George Bush who really did re-win Vietnam in the guise of the Gulf War, affirms the bleak prediction that Spanos made in 1995.

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