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From "Jaws": A Lovable Scientist

Go see the record-breaking movie "Jaws." Better yet, send your nonscientific neighbors and acquaintances. Hardly for what they will learn about sharks, but for what they will feel about scientists. The movie has created and popularized, better than almost any series of lectures, slides, or other devices to promote public understanding of science could, a new cultural hero—a concerned and considerate, warm, yet highly competent scientist, in the character of oceanographer Hooper, played by Richard Dreyfuss. Hooper provides a fine antidote to the image of the scientist as Dr. Strangelove, a cold, mad person dedicated only to his instruments, indifferent to the world, an image that may not dominate popular culture but is surely a widely held one.

In the view of this observer, next to the mechanical supershark, Hooper steals the show. The other roles were created from the papier-mâché of clichés: the mayor, more concerned with the profit of the merchants of the town than with the lives and limbs of visiting tourists; the police chief, wavering between doing his duty to protect the public and following the orders of the mayor; the rough sailor who takes on the shark, a Captain Ahab versus Moby Dick. Only the scientist succeeds in breaking out of these cinematic stereotypes.

Faced with the body of a young woman dismembered by the shark, the scientist does not coldly and mechanically observe, record, and measure, but first is properly distressed, expressing his dismay, and comes across as a human being, not a frigid pathologist. And yet, despite his feelings, he does go on with his work, to record what must be recorded, to measure what must be measured, and to draw the appropriate conclusions. Suddenly encountering another victim, a dead fisherman, the scientist initially appears as much subject to fright as any other person, but then conquers his fear in order to go on with his exploration—even to face the supershark later in what turns out to be a fragile underwater cage. He is thus portrayed not as a bloodless machine but as a person of strong feeling and stronger character.

Confronted by a mayor who is unwilling to close the beaches, even when told that the teeth of a captured shark thought to be the killer do not match the marks the supershark left on his victims, this scientist fights for the proper public policy—to keep the beaches closed—with both competently assembled scientific evidence and passionate human concern.

At sea, far from conforming to the image of the aloof, unbending, humorless "brain," more able to deal with objects than to relate to people, Hooper holds his own in a drinking party with the sailor and police chief, matching them in capacity for liquor, language, and tall tales.

Not every scientist will care to identify with Hooper. Some will see him as too involved, overly sentimental, maybe even too much of a "hippie." But, recalling that all the human "failings," from feeling strong emotions to taking a normative stand to mixing in politics to rowdy socializing, do not deter the man from doing his scientific work and doing it well, "Jaws" does offer an image of the scientist as a cultural hero that counters the Frankenstein or Strangelove movie myth. "Jaws" will hardly kill off all antisentimental sentiments, but it will sink some, and introduce to the mass audience a positive character—a character who has considerably less historical depth than Thomas Edison or Madame Curie, but at least as much warmth!—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Department of Sociology, Columbia University*, and *Director, Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027*