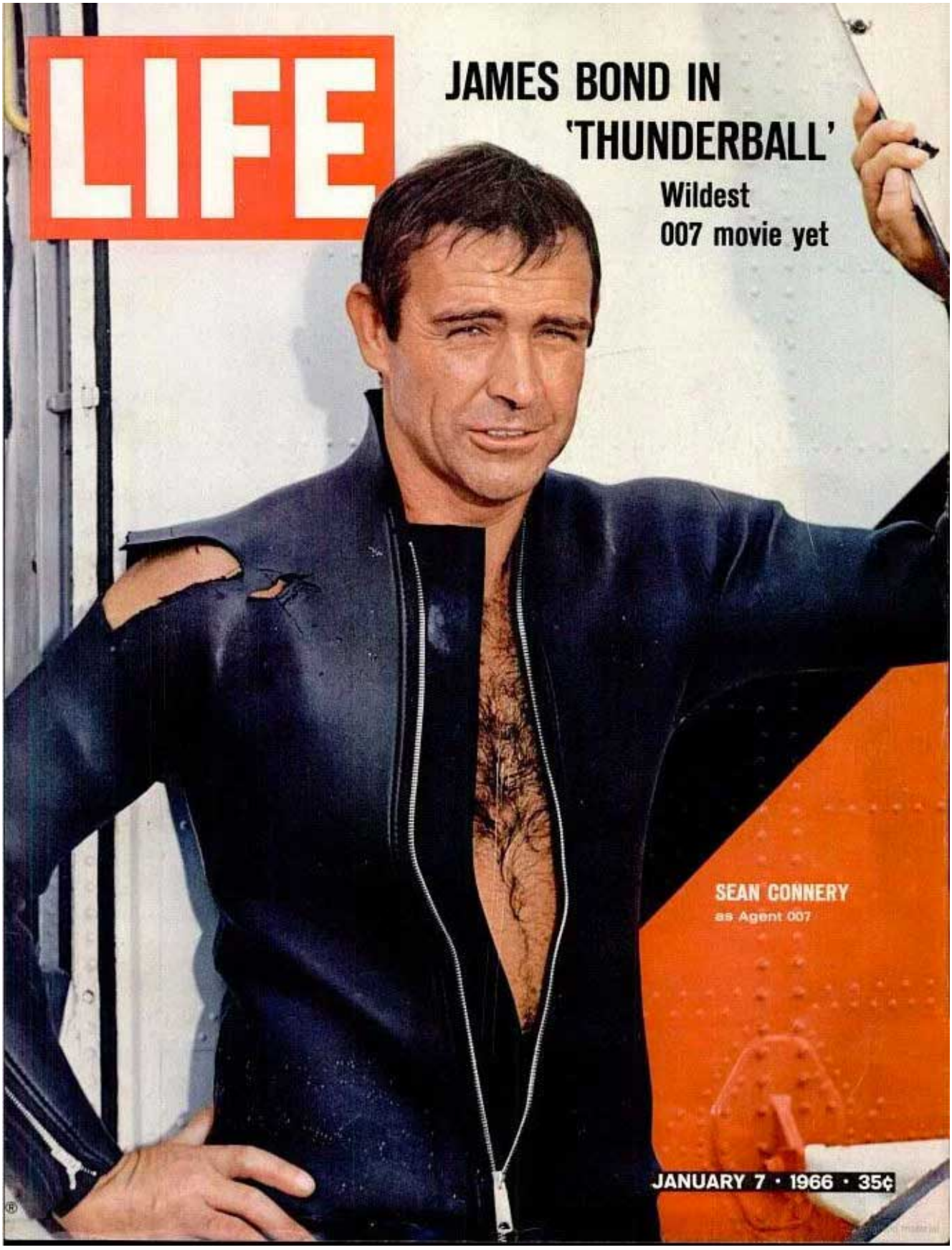
POP diving: 007 Thunderball

POP diving. Our journey to discover what has made diving popular: characters, on paper or celluloid, who became cult heroes of the diving community.

With 1 billion dollars in 2011, *Thunderball* (1965) is the second highest grossing Bond movie, after *Skyfall*. In *Thunderball*, commercial cinema draws heavily on underwater filming and its choreographic possibilities.



THE MOVIE

A RAF nuclear bomber, Avro Vulcan (which carries a nuclear device on board) disappears off the radar, and then settles like a leaf on a sandy bottom so white that it can only be in the Bahamas. Like in the

previous movie *Goldfinger*, an atomic bomb in the hands of the bad guys is a huge mess that only Bond can take care of. Sean Connery, in amazing shape, escapes miraculously from a swimming pool swarming with sharks, while in another scene he makes out behind a coral head with Claudine Auger, the bond girl on duty, implying to the public that underwater you can do a lot of things. Grand finale with underwater battle between the good and the bad guys using harpoons and knives to cut breathing hoses. A movie that tastes of salt water, baby powder, and old red-orange neoprene.

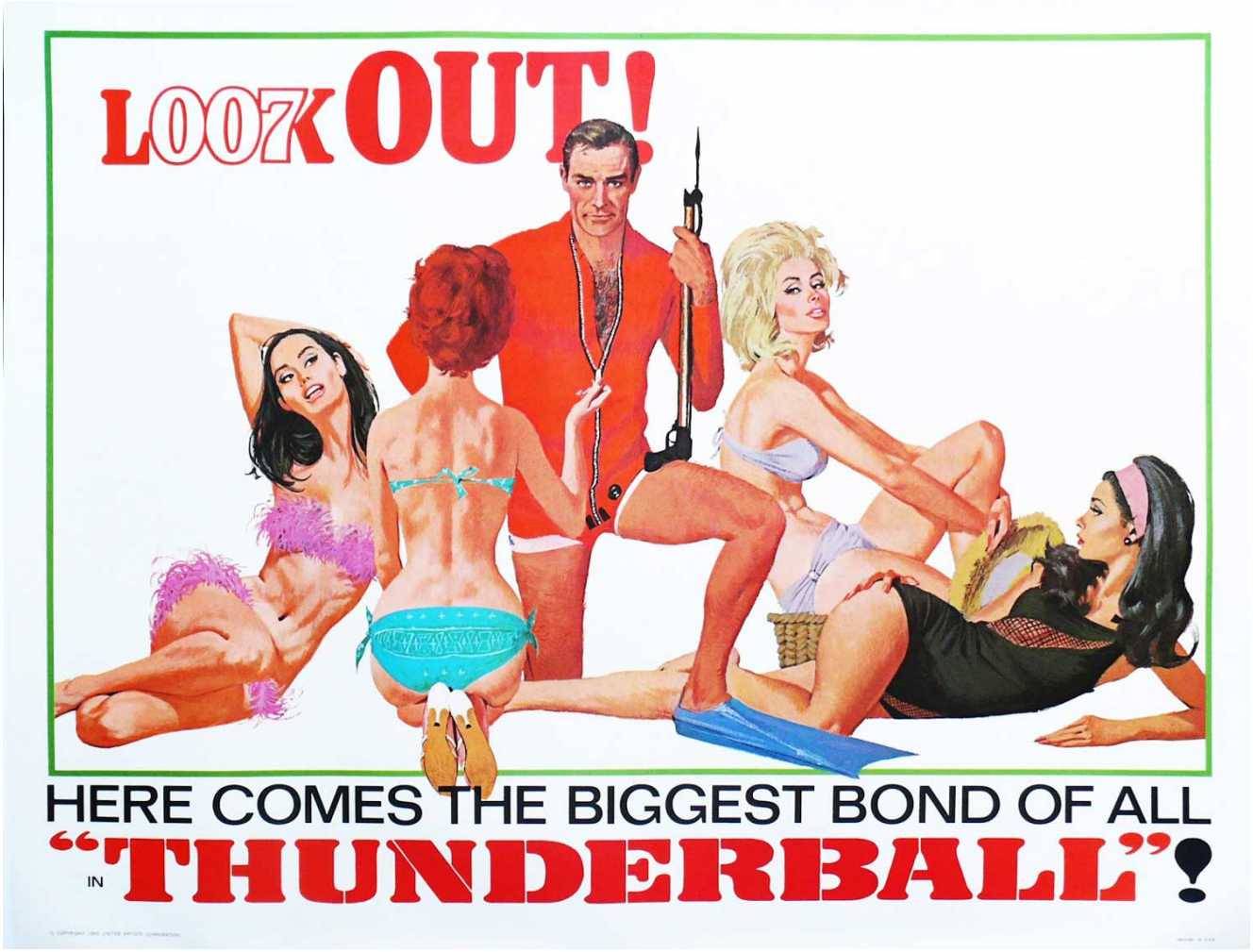
BUDDY CHECK

The BCD, this unknown device. The first serial BCD appeared in the beginning of the ’70s, while the movie was made in ’65. *Thunderball* is a triumph of backplates and Cordura straps. Not to mention the alternate air source, which appeared on the diving scene much later.

HANDLE WITH CARE

Diving without a BCD entailed absolute precision when choosing a weight system, and great skill in controlling lung capacity with the breath. Diving without alternate air source required a certain ability in buddy breathing, a technique that is currently dreaded by students and instructors alike.

BEWARE. Ascents (and descents) in the movie scenes are done at rocket speed, perfectly in line with the urgency of the situation: avoiding being stabbed or becoming breakfast for a tiger shark. Indeed, it was the absence of a BCD that allowed background actors to move in the water like freedivers. With the result that *Thunderball* is the movie that collected the highest number of barotraumas during the shooting. In other words: don’t try this at home…



FICTION IMPOSSIBLE

A bomber pilot breaths at a depth of 30 meters using his oxygen mask designed for a military aircraft. Find the two mistakes.

URBAN LEGENDS

Here is a celebrated Bond gadget that dies hard in divers' imagination: the micro-tank at super high pressure and the size of a fountain pen! At times we see it pop up on blogs, magazines, and diving forums. At the time, the scenes were so convincing that the British Army asked about it. "How long can a man survive underwater with that device?" Asked a Royal Engineers officer, "As long as he can hold his breath!" Was the answer of the art director.



THE LEGACY

With *Thunderball*, diving ceases to exist only in documentaries, and takes its place among the daily wish list of a society that is experiencing a great economic boom. Equipment and vehicles used, among which the ancestors of underwater scooters, broke into the collective consciousness of two generations: toys as well as real diving gear dominated shop windows. *Thunderball* was the greatest commercial for diving ever seen.

Nowadays, diving is almost absent from *mainstream* movies, it is treated really badly. But between the ‘50s and ‘60s, it worked its way into the imagination of many authors. Diving gave the chance to movie directors and cameramen of shooting scenes on the move in three dimensions. In a few years, it started to migrate to popular culture, becoming a cult activity. Over time, it was science fiction and space travel that took the place of diving in the collective consciousness, replacing underwater landscapes full of life with aseptic spacecraft interiors, and with a dream that is honestly harder to realize. And leaving us all, it has to be said, high and dry.

FACTS

- Oscar Prize in 1966 for special effects.
- The highest number of scenes shot underwater, approximately 40% of the total.
- The highest number of divers shot in a single scene, approximately 60.

MORE

- 007 Thunderball

EXPLORE THE DIVE SITES

- Thunderball Grotto – What it’s like and What you Need to Know
- Into the Blue

VIDEO

- The full movie on Dailymotion
- Underwater battle

MEMORABILIA

- Underwater Battle. Board game
- Il Disco Volante (Flying Saucer), Largo’s yacht. Wooden model boat

