

If you are using this resource in your work please remember to reference and cite the original work found here:
<http://www.ukessays.com/essays/film-studies/jaws.php>

Subject Area - Film Studies

Jaws

Jaws by Steven Spielberg.

Jaws, widely acknowledged as a seminal watershed film, signalled the birth of the summer blockbuster and quickly earned its place in cinematic history when it broke box office records in the summer of 1975 becoming the top-grossing movie of all time. (Hoberman 1994) Thirty-three years later the film has lost little of its original impact and has prompted widespread study of the complex themes and subtext which lie underneath what has been acknowledged as a 'high concept' plot (Wyatt 1994) – a tag which I feel is misleading as it implies a lack of substance and character development within the narrative. A rich and structured film, based on Peter Benchley's best-selling novel of the same name, the film skilfully triggers the viewer's imagination and awakens a primal fear of the unseen and unknown - a device which continues in contemporary cinema to attract audiences. This may be the most obvious appeal of the film but I seek to demonstrate through the course of this work that the popularity of the film can be attributed to a variety of factors including symbolism, an original marketing campaign and release pattern in addition to plot, content and style which successfully manipulates the audience in a manner reminiscent of Hitchcock's films.

The plot revolves around a series of shark attacks which take place on the 4th of July weekend in the waters around the fictional New England island of Amity, a tourist hub in the summer months. Police Chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider), a newcomer to the island, immediately raises the alarm and attempts to close the beaches to the public but is blocked in his efforts by the local Mayor and islanders who are scared that the ensuing panic and media frenzy will stunt the tourist trade which the island is heavily reliant upon. Several more attacks take place before the local officials are convinced there is a real threat to public safety and eventually concede to hiring Quint (Robert Shaw) a local shark hunter and veteran of WWII to seek and destroy the beast. Brody accompanies Quint and marine biologist Matt Cooper (Richard Dreyfus) out to sea. Quint is killed by the shark during an attack in which the boat is destroyed. In a last ditch attempt to save himself and Cooper as the ship sinks Brody succeeds in vanquishing the great white. (Jaws 1975)

A large part of Jaws huge commercial success can be attributed to the fact that the American film landscape had been occupied for over a decade with dark independent films of the American New Wave. These films were often pessimistic and representative of the 60s and early 70s counter culture which had emerged during the Vietnam years. They appealed to a niche market and were generally low budget and character driven and did not usually cater for mainstream tastes – particularly the elusive teen demographic. Jaws was mainstream in the purest sense and could be understood and enjoyed easily. It had a simplistic plotline which harked back to golden age of cinema. Pauline Kael, quoted in Biskind (1999), described it as "infantilizing the audience, reconstituting the spectator as child, then overwhelming him and her with sound and spectacle" (Biskind 1999).

Jaws delighted audiences by scaring and thrilling them with large complex set pieces and ambitious and original special effects the like of which had never been seen before. (Rowley)

Hoberman describes the film as "...predicated on a ruthless notion of the movie as rollercoaster" (Hoberman 1994). It heralded a revival of the high adventure films and contained elements of the disaster, male buddy and horror films. The plot although simple was not predictable and the storyline was dotted with a series of red herrings which added to the

Find more free essays like this one...

We have a large reference library of essays that you can use as research materials to help with your own writing - check out our [free film studies essays](#).

Share this resource with your friends...

We hope you found this information in this free pdf useful. Please spread the word and tell your friends how this information has helped you with your studies and feel free to share this pdf with others, so it can help them too.



Keep up to date with the latest essay writing hints, tips and free research materials to help you with your assignments - simply subscribe to our RSS feed or join us on Facebook now!

If you are using this resource in your work please remember to reference and cite the original work found here:
<http://www.ukessays.com/essays/film-studies/jaws.php>

suspenseful nature of the film as well as evoking the paranoia of the hero.

Another factor which added to the film's appeal was the fact that despite the extremely suspenseful nature of the action, enhanced by the fact that the shark is not revealed until 80 minutes into the film, Spielberg did not let the suspense become too harrowing and horrific. "Spielberg keeps a lightness of touch...and makes the action-adventure sequences in the film's last third truly exhilarating" (Rowley)

Although primarily a film of spectacle Spielberg enriched the film with careful and effective character development which renders his characters human and believable, allowing the audience to identify with them. The hero of the film is Brody but he is flawed and fragile. Positioned clearly from his initial scene as an outsider in a tight knit community he is plagued by insecurity, fear of the water and is impotent against the Mayor and islanders who undermine his authority as chief of police. (Jaws 1975)

Brody is portrayed sympathetically and this is exemplified by tender moments like the one which he shares with his youngest son at the dinner table. Deep in thought and agonising about the deaths he perhaps could have prevented – his son attracts his attention by sensing his father's sadness and mimicking his movements. This tender scene effectively positions Brody as a father and husband that we can identify with. (Jaws 1975)

In the second reel the action takes a back seat and the focus imperceptibly shifts to focus more firmly on character development – particularly that of the conflicted 'hero'. In the final third of the film Brody decides to confront his fear of the water - in the process the protagonist reaches maturity. Through persistence and blood and sweat he accomplishes his massive task and vanquishes the wild beast. The plotline of the film ultimately tells a heroic tale which is a staple plot component which appeals strongly to mainstream American audiences.

Through the aesthetics of the film Spielberg succeeds in enhancing the audience rapport with his characters thus enhancing enjoyment of the film. He incorporates stylistic elements from the 'new Hollywood' films which had preceded Jaws using real settings and non actors in supporting roles enhancing the overall realism. Naturalistic performances by actors also contributed to this and produced one of the most quoted lines from the film – "you're going to need a bigger boat". (Rowley)

"The subjective camera is the purest instrument of torture at a film-makers disposal. It is the means by which audience is most comprehensively and viscerally implicated in the onscreen action" (Gilbey 2003)

Through positioning the viewer from the point of view of the shark before the attacks Spielberg successfully plunges the audience into the water too, building suspense and enhancing the horror of the attacks. (Gilbey 2003)

Another vital component is John William's unforgettable score which creates a strong sense of apprehension through his employment of a signature warning theme for the killer shark. In the documentary 'The Making of Jaws' Spielberg confessed the impact of the score had a significant impact on viewer enjoyment stating: "I think the score is clearly responsible for half the success of the movie". His comments were based on the fact that preview audiences didn't respond well to initial screening before score was added. (Jaws 1975)

Find more free essays like this one...

We have a large reference library of essays that you can use as research materials to help with your own writing - check out our [free film studies essays](#).

Share this resource with your friends...

We hope you found this information in this free pdf useful. Please spread the word and tell your friends how this information has helped you with your studies and feel free to share this pdf with others, so it can help them too.

If you are using this resource in your work please remember to reference and cite the original work found here:
<http://www.ukessays.com/essays/film-studies/jaws.php>

Themes

Jaws was released at a time of political turbulence in American history in the years following the Vietnam War and the film was in production during the Watergate scandal. Several key film historians believed that film's subtext and coded themes may have appealed strongly to the collective American psyche of this period.

Hoberman in particular ascertained that Jaws was indeed 'a political film' which 'represented a crisis in American leadership.' (Hoberman 1994)

The plot – a traditional small town American community battling an unseen entity which attacked unexpectedly and at random draws parallels with the American experience in Vietnam. The shark attacks immediately before the 4th of July weekend – a time of celebration of all that is American and a profitable period during which the townspeople of Amity made much of their wealth to see them through the winter months. The fear of shark attacks threatens the economy and creates a sense of paranoia and uncertainty.

"Its obvious wish fulfilment narrative of the annihilation of a murderous, devious and implacable enemy...the destruction of the shark Jaws offers it audience a gratifying symbolic resolution to the war..." (Torry 1993).

Biskind (1975) translates the somewhat negative portrayal of local authorities such Mayor Vaughn and the town officials who try to cover up the attacks and doctor the medical report as cinematic representations of what was going on at that time on American soil and in particular as an incarnation of President Nixon.

"Jaws is a tale of liberalism at sea, barely afloat in shark-infested waters, but nevertheless afloat. It is ultimately cathartic and comforting" (Biskind 1975).

Despite the film's criticisms of the Republican administration of the time Jaws interestingly also reveals a traditional conservatism in an otherwise liberal film.

For example, the murder of the female swimmer is filmed in such a way – from the POV of the shark – that invites us to identify with the murderer and celebrate her death. This can be put down to a desire to confirm to conservative attitudes to gender roles. The woman is killed because she of her sexual freedom and promiscuity. This is a relevant and timely thesis which may explains its popularity with audiences given that feminism was a strong topic on the cultural agenda in the US at this period.

Similarly, Quint also befalls a grisly death because of what he represents. He is portrayed as an individualistic character who lives outside of the 'respectable' society which Jaws threatens. His bardy humour and songs and the fact that he exploits the town's situation to make a huge profit from killing the shark position him as a less than moral character. Brody, on the other hand, survives and is clearly coded as the hero precisely because he is a normal, run of the mill family man – a typical American citizen who respects and upholds the law. (Biskind, 1975)

"Jaws flatters us by holding out the promise that such a triumph over unspeakable terror is within reach of us all" (Biskind 1975).

Find more free essays like this one...

We have a large reference library of essays that you can use as research materials to help with your own writing - check out our [free film studies essays](#).

Share this resource with your friends...

We hope you found this information in this free pdf useful. Please spread the word and tell your friends how this information has helped you with your studies and feel free to share this pdf with others, so it can help them too.



Keep up to date with the latest essay writing hints, tips and free research materials to help you with your assignments - simply subscribe to our RSS feed or join us on Facebook now!

If you are using this resource in your work please remember to reference and cite the original work found here:
<http://www.ukessays.com/essays/film-studies/jaws.php>

Kenneth Turan, a film critic for The Progressive in 1975, opened his review of the blockbuster with the line (quoted in Hoberman, 2004) "I have seen the future and it is JAWS".

This quote is particularly pertinent when we regard the carefully coordinated way in which the film was packaged and released. I would argue strongly that the innovative methods employed in this area played a huge role in the popularity of the film – transforming it a mere film into a summer event and phenomenon that audiences could not resist experiencing and wholeheartedly bought into.

Where studios had previously employed a slow feed model for releasing features Jaws was released nationally by Universal at 460 cinemas simultaneously. In addition to this the release was accompanied by an unprecedented massive TV advertising campaign which created wide public awareness in the US and internationally. The studio did not stop here – a wide range of tie-in merchandising soon flooded the marketplace and as noted by film historian J. Hoberman (2004) "the movie's box office appeal fed into itself, transforming a hit movie into something larger, a new form of feedback and a new model for the movies". (Hoberman 2004)

The use of a variety of promotional mediums gave the film a 'head start' in the marketplace which had a huge impact on box office sales. Wyatt (1994) explains the legacy of this original campaign:

"The marketing campaign of Jaws indicates the direction which film marketing would follow during the next decade. The reliance on strong reproducible images, the saturation campaign and widespread product tie-ins steadily became standard marketing practices after the success of such films as Jaws."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books & Journals

Biskind, Peter (1975) 'Between the Teeth' in Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media No. 9

Biskind, Peter (1999) Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood (London: Bloomsbury)

Gilbey, Ryan (2003) It Don't Worry Me: Nashville, Jaws and Beyond (London: Faber and Faber)

Hoberman, J (1994) 'Don't Go Near the Water' in Artforum International Magazine Vol 32, Issue 8

Hoberman, J (2004) 'Nashville Contra Jaws' or 'The Imagination of Disaster Revisited' in Horwath, King and Elsaesser (eds) The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press)

Torry, Robert (1993) 'Therapeutic Narrative: The Wild Bunch, Jaws and Vietnam' in Velvet Light Trap Issue 32

Wyatt, Justin (1994) High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood (Austin: University of Texas Press)

This essay was written by a student and then submitted to us to help other students. You should not hand in this essay as your own work - we do not condone plagiarism! If you need custom essay help, then check out our essay writing service.

Find more free essays like this one...

We have a large reference library of essays that you can use as research materials to help with your own writing - check out our [free film studies essays](#).

Share this resource with your friends...

We hope you found this information in this free pdf useful. Please spread the word and tell your friends how this information has helped you with your studies and feel free to share this pdf with others, so it can help them too.



Keep up to date with the latest essay writing hints, tips and free research materials to help you with your assignments - simply subscribe to our RSS feed or join us on Facebook now!