

SPECIALE Spielberg's *Jaws* and the Disaster Film

The cultural context of Jaws (foreword)

Jaws has long served as a convenient chapter break in the recent history of Hollywood. Its box office returns broke records in its initial release in June 1975. It launched the 40 plus years career of Steven Spielberg as the leading American filmmaker. It also uncovered a new and more stable audience for the American film studios. It is certainly the film that is mentioned most often in the same breath as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) as the pair that articulated the new blockbuster formula that sustained Hollywood, while the film industry successfully negotiated the new markets of home video, cable television and an eventual reinvigorated dominance of the global media market.

Peter Biskind¹ describes the inside story of the jockeying of egos and artistic ambitions in the early 1970s that culminated into the realization that the young Turks of the film industry had just stumbled into a gold mine of astronomical box office returns. So on that level alone there was a moral shift from cinema as art to movies as money machines. Thomas Schatz¹ analyzes how marketing and distribution practices that created these gold mines were pioneered by the wide release of *Jaws* and its effective advertising. Yet none of these shifts are unquestionably exclusive to *Jaws*. *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) had already established the superior earning power of young directors. Their films pointed to a new audience and a new sensibility that as for lack of a better expression was simply more bloody minded than earlier audiences. It is *Star Wars* that finally culminated the escalating succession of high and higher box office. It is also the film that inspired young adults to spend additional money on repeat viewings of both the original and the sequels. This repeat viewing became salient to the strategies of the studio distributors (Ernest). Indeed it is also *Star Wars* that established the preferred content of the new blockbuster: adventure in exotic or mythical places. Therefore we may ask on the 40th anniversary whether it is time to demystify *Jaws*' role as the breakthrough film.

One may even ask if we need such any such breakthrough in our film history. Can we just not accept the seamless evolution of movie style out of the perennial need for filmmakers to distinguish themselves from their predecessors and the audience's constant need for the combination of the familiar and the new that is the formula for all of popular culture?

But with *Jaws* the fact that its style coincided with a broader political economic turn in society, makes us pay attention. Writing much closer to the period than now, J. Hoberman³ had fun with placing *Jaws* in juxtaposition with political cultural events such as the rival movie *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975), and then bringing in such contemporary incidents as the now forgotten Mayaguez incident (when the Khmer Rouge took a US Merchant Marine ship and the US Marines attacked in the last engagement of the Vietnam war era). There is the even more charged coincidence of the *Jaws* production crew using the same Chappaquiddick bridge that Senator Ted Kennedy drove off into the water five years earlier. His passenger, Mary Jo Kopechne, drowned, as the Senator panicked. But these are simple signs of the times; mere epiphenomena.

Hindsight gives us a longer view of the political context for the style of *Jaws* than Hoberman's examples of the concurrent rot of American leadership. We can see now that this was a constitutive turn away from a prevailing "New Deal" consensus in American national politics and towards a conflation of public interest with the marketplace that has driven policy determinations since the mid-1970s. This time period has now been identified as the end of the steady post war rise in income. It is also the pivot point towards the current growing inequality in wealth. It is the shrinking of public space and participation. Within a year Jimmy Carter would be elected to the presidency and begin the policy among Democrats

SPECIALE of deregulating business and embracing the tenets of neo-liberal faith in the marketplace (at least Carter still emphasized faith. Now faith recedes as the marketplace becomes omnipresent). Can not *Jaws* be the bellwether for these monumental changes? Can not its contours reveal an American audience turning away from a previous sensibility?

Several critics have used political interpretations to illuminate the story of *Jaws*. However an important part of cinematic art is developing a shooting style that deepens the meaning of the story. So it is natural to discover that the politics of *Jaws* was just as much in its craft as in its script. In developing this thesis I wish to build upon Buckland's skillful analysis of *Jaws*' style. As *Jaws* eroded the moralism of the underlying story, the script lost interest in judging characters. This gave the director the opportunity to use his camera inside the action in order to plunge the audience into the direct experience of fear. This is in contrast with an older aesthetic that asked the audience to judge characters and to measure the fictional response to disaster.

This style is part of a general trend that has been debated as a decisive break or merely an intensification of an action style that has been part of the Hollywood arsenal since the beginning. Jean-Pierre Geuens and Robert Blanchet have been useful in describing this as a break. The new style is invested in immersing the audience into visceral emotions. Geuens⁴ borrows from William James's stages of emotions in order to distinguish the immediate "flight or fear" trigger that occurs before the subject even has the emotion of fear. While the more traditional movie was content with summoning audience fear, the new film seeks the immediate "startle effect". It was to have the immediacy of a speech act, where the speech does not describe an act, it is the act⁵.

Others wonder why there is such an emphasis on the novelty of "startle effect," since there have been shock techniques in the movies from the beginning. Bordwell, in particular, feels that there is nothing new under the Hollywood sun. Although he will admit a certain increase in shock and startle that he attributes to a new generation trying to outdo an earlier set of filmmakers in a "belated" attempt to catch up and surpass⁶. But this insistence on an internal evolution of style is too limited in its critical ambitions. The overwhelming factor in a critique of *Jaws* is that it was a social phenomenon. Therefore its style was not just passively accepted by the audience but actively becomes the future template for blockbusters since the audience now embracing *Jaws*, allowed other concurrent style innovations to wither on the vine.

I feel that *Jaws* is a specific case in which to actually locate the relationship between the evolving consensus ideology of the American audience and the film style of big blockbuster movies. It is still a transitional film while *Star Wars* is the fully arrived new blockbuster, but *Jaws* and the phenomenon of its wildly popular reception is the precise moment of a decided break both with classic Hollywood storytelling and the blatant revisionism of "New" Hollywood. Spielberg is turning away from moral sources of identification with the characters in favor of a direct experience with fear. In order to do this he is redirecting the reason for photorealism. For him it becomes a style less concerned with authenticity and more of a way to achieve visceral immersion.

Additionally we should notice that *Jaws* is the end of the disaster film cycle. The contrast between *Jaws* and its immediate predecessor *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, released six months earlier in the Christmas season of 1974) supports the thesis that *Jaws* gave the audience a new thrill that allowed them to reject the disaster film. While *The Towering Inferno* was a smash hit, each post-*Jaws* disaster movie declined in box office even as Spielberg and Lucas films continued to earn spectacular amounts⁷. The disaster films still belonged to the collective politics of the post New-Deal age. It was a genre that was inclusive. Yacower lists such disparate formulas as "Natural Attack/Ship of Fools/The City Fails/The Monster/Survival/War/ Historical"⁸. But the cycle that began in 1970 with *Airport* (George Seaton, Henry Hathaway, 1970), was rather narrow in its moralism. Retribution was visited on the bad and while innocent and good people died, they typically had an ethical lesson in sacrifice to impart. Nick Roddick writes the disaster movies have their "emphasis on the group rather than the individual, and on the reaction to the disaster rather than – or as well as – the disaster itself. The modern disaster movie is

SPECIALE not so much a spectacular entertainment, it is more a didactic form which plays on the latent guilt and Schadenfreude of the audience in order to indicate the need for a certain kind of societal reorganization⁹. It is this disaster film formula of didactic lessons and moral retribution that withered on the vine in the aftermath of *Jaws*¹⁰. *Jaws* actually still had such elements in the source novel and to a lesser degree in the script but Spielberg was not motivated by these elements. His insistence on shocking his audience mirrors the American polity's turn away from political activism. In order to explain this better let's turn to a set of comparisons between two representative disaster films, *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, Irwin Allen, 1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (produced by Irwin Allen), and *Jaws*. To be sure, *Jaws* is a thriller while the disaster films have a somewhat different formula for suspense. Nonetheless they are directly comparable and therefore their differences are a truthful measure for a shift in audience sensibilities.

The Didactic Lessons of The Poseidon Adventure and The Towering Inferno

In *Poseidon* the cruise ship overturns after being hit by a massive typhoon wave. The surviving passengers spend the rest of the film making their way through the upside down ship to reach the propeller shaft where they hope to find a thinner part of the hull that will allow them to escape to the surface of the ocean. In *Towering Inferno* the disaster is a fire in the just completed tallest skyscraper in the world located in San Francisco. Both the capsizing wave and the fire emergency occur in the second act of the dramas after the first act establishes the situation, the characters and their relationships. In *Poseidon's* first act it is revealed that the ships' owners have overruled the captain on the sea worthiness of the ship. In *Inferno*, there is a similar revelation of using inferior wires in the skyscraper.

Thus even before the disaster strikes, a pattern of sin and virtue has started to emerge. Indeed Allen has already telegraphed to the audience some of these patterns just by the act of casting. *Poseidon* was on a rather limited budget but nonetheless the movie featured several actors who were well known such as Gene Hackman, Ernest Borgnine, Shelley Winters, Stella Stevens, Red Buttons and Jack Albertson. Hackman's greatest claim to fame at that time was playing a police detective in *The French Connection* and the audience would expect his character to be someone who valued getting in front of the action rather than waiting passively for events. Borgnine had alternated between the comedic in *McHale's Navy* (ABC 1962-1966) and the tough guy in a variety of films including *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969). The movie would build upon audience's expectations about Borgnine's earthy skepticism as well as Shelly Winters' capacity for sacrifice and Red Buttons' willingness to help. Allen could anticipate even more expectations in *The Towering Inferno* where the budget allowed the top stars such as Paul Newman, Steve McQueen and William Holden as well as Jennifer Jones and Fred Astaire to participate. In both films the releasing studio invited audience to already be playing the guessing game of who will die and who will live and who will be redeemed, even before they entered the theater. Twentieth Century Fox did so by advertising with one sheets that featured a banner display at the bottom that strung together cameo shots of a dozen actors.

This attitude towards using stars dictated a shooting style. Since there were so many stars Allen and his directors loved to show them together in the same frame. Indeed there was a cinematic equality between Paul Newman and Steve McQueen since McQueen's contract stipulated that he should have as many script lines as Newman. The camera loved the longer shot that established the spatial relationships between the Hollywood actors and actresses. The close up and the psychological motivated point of view shot were relatively rare and often less important to the action.

In *Poseidon* the drama unfolds as a series of forks in the path to survival. Each fork not only represents a new space but a fresh confrontation and revelation. Reverend Scott (Gene Hackman) has to move forward even as his fellow minister resigns himself to fate. The didacticism is underlined by Reverend Scott's pre-disaster dialogue about commitment to life and his constant plea to activism after the capsizing. He has

SPECIALE to teach Rogo to assume responsibility as the dwindling band of survivors keep following him. Rogo's reluctance is redeemed when he assumes leadership after the Reverend falls to his death.

Inferno is less sequential since it does not have the spatial frame of a passageway to safety. The fire has ignited due to the use of wires inferior to the architect's specifications. The moral question is whether to fight the fire in a cooperative manner or not. Already human beings stand implicated in the catastrophe and they continue to compound their virtue and guilt by their reactions. Bigelow (Robert Wagner) dodges all administrative matters and hints of impending disaster, in order to rush into the adulterous arms of his secretary. He cuts off their phone ensuring their demise when the fire comes and there is no way to cry for help. Simmons (Richard Chamberlain) rushes the last gondola to safety when it is not his turn and sure enough the gondola crashes killing him and others. On the positive side, Lisolette (Jennifer Jones) accepts her fatal sacrifice while forgiving Harlee Clairborne (Fred Astaire). The hero-architect Doug Roberts (Paul Newman) defers to the hero-fire chief (Steve McQueen) and remains his loyal companion even to the point of accompanying him on the final near-suicidal mission.

The Shift from Jaws the Novel to Jaws the Movie

Irwin Allen was in pursuit of the same audience as Zanuck and Brown and even Spielberg. He had instructed his director on *The Poseidon Adventure*, Ron Neame, to target young pre-teen and teen age movie goers (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1999). But it is indicative of Allen's mindset that the two pre-teens are poorly integrated into the important moral dramas of the rescue. His scripts are more comfortable with adult relationships. On the contrary, Spielberg hooks young adults effortlessly with the opening scene of *Jaws* and its open embrace of a hedonistic nighttime beach party and his subsequent buildup of Matt Hooper¹¹. He goes on to take them on a non-stop ride through anticipated and actual attacks. His portrayal of the party and Hooper differs significantly from the novel that *Jaws* is based on. Indeed in moving from the novel which shares Allen's concern with adult relationship to the movie we start to pinpoint a decisive shift.

The entire disaster genre's economy of sin, retribution, sacrifice and heroism is downgraded in *Jaws* the movie. Many of these elements are still present in the novel written by Peter Benchley. Benchley begins the novel with the shark attack on the girl swimmer at night and then allows the relationship of the characters to play in response to the attack. The sheriff is easily stopped in his effort to close the beach by the townspeople and the mayor. Several sociological conflicts emerge in the wake of shark attack. The beach town is divided between the all-year rounders and the summer people. This easily maps onto a class conflict between families of privilege and white collar professionalism and people more accustomed to physical work. Benchley now parcels out sins among the aspiring and the middle classes. Matt Hooper, a marine scientist, shows up and discovers that his brother once dated the Sheriff's wife. This leads to an extramarital affair since Mrs. Brody seems to have unresolved feelings about marrying outside her socio-economic status. There also turns out to be corrupt land deal that is driving the Mayor to stop any beach closings. In the novel these sinners receive punishment. The shark consumes Hooper and the Mayor leaves town before he can be indicted. Only the sheriff survives to return to shore as the shark's fate is to arbitrarily disappear from that body of water.

The extra marital affair had by now become de rigeur for this cycle of the suburban novel and by extension as part of the thriller. Instances of political corruption were also popular in the years surrounding the end of the Nixon administration. These of course would help set up the moral landscape of the disaster but Spielberg and Gottlieb quietly eliminate even the hint of attraction between Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfus) and Mrs. Brody (Lorraine Grey). They then go on to erase the land deals sub-plot and to also simplify the town's opposition to beach closings. The movie Mayor (Murray Hamilton) confesses the error of his ways even without suffering personal loss in a minor scene. Again the scriptwriters were turning away from an opportunity that Irwin Allen would have seized for a moral judgment.

SPECIALE The survival of Hooper and even the omission of the Mayor's come upppance shows Spielberg's desire to move on from the culture wars of "New" Hollywood and its obsession with exposing the corruption of the "establishment." In contrast, *Jaws* centers on the sheriff's response to the escalating crisis and remains on his side through the end. Spielberg is notable in his sincere sympathy for even his flawed characters and is constantly reminding the audience to also feel sympathy for Sheriff Brody. Neither the book nor the film utilizes any notion of sacrifice. In contrast, Allen consistently had two types of sacrifices in his films. Sacrifice denied: as in the case the Fire Chief going on an admittedly suicide mission to blow up the water tanks and yet he both succeeds and survives (*Towering Inferno*). Sacrifice acknowledged and accepted: as when Belle Rosen (Shelley Winters) volunteers to swim through submerged obstacle course and dies soon afterwards from exhaustion (*Poseidon*). *Jaws'* omission of sacrifice is symptomatic of a larger condition: the disappearance of the collective.

The Group Fails to Come Together

There are several groups in *Jaws*. But there is no cooperation or collective spirit. The town meeting is self-interested, the waves of fishermen seeking the bounty on the shark, are chaotic and dangerous to each other. After these various groups fail to deal with the shark attacks, Brody hires a veteran fisherman, Quint (Robert Shaw) to take his boat The Orca out to sea to pursue the monster. He insists on bringing along Matt Hooper. These three men on the Orca become the strongest example of the lack of the collective in the blockbuster. James Bernardoni severely attacked the movie by stressing how the characters fail to form a cohesive unit in their sea hunt. He compared their failure to the classic bonding episodes in the various films of Howard Hawks. Despite the internal jousting of egos and other divisive emotions in these older movies, Hawks always made sure that the group eventually achieve mutual support. But in *Jaws* there is only a thin simulation of bonding, and even this falls apart in the final crisis. The three men who go out represent the changing categories of work in 1970s America. Brody is an employee of the government and the emerging security apparatus. Hooper is a forerunner of the coming generation of technical expertise. Quint is the old, the already ruined relic of the manufacturing and fishing industries of the past. The director undermines the working man's dignity by introducing the character with a childish fingernail crawl on the blackboard to summon everyone's attention. Quint continues to engage in puerile confrontations and becomes a generational foil for Hooper. The rare scene that pauses for character definition is towards the end as Quint relates his experiences after the sinking of the USS Indianapolis. The World War II veteran confesses his Ahab-like obsession with sharks to the scientist and the policeman. He is trapped in older mold of manual labor and long experience. His experience is also his downfall since his motivation to get the shark is driven by personal vengeance, the unwanted baggage of long experience.

Quint's experience would have been validated in an Irwin Allen disaster. *The Towering Inferno's* heroes - the Fire Chief and the Architect - are experienced men who still know how to work with their hands. Although the architect Doug Roberts is initially powerless against the flames, his hands on knowledge is critical to the Fire Chief as they strategize. He knows because he built the tower. *Verum factum*. They belong to the manufacturing period of American history. But in *Jaws*, the present and future belonged to the representatives of the growth careers of the future: Hooper and Brody. In that way their characters capture the attention of young adults with its hints of a post-hippie reconciliation between individualism and technology. Hooper can be both a free agent and an expert through his access and use of the latest gear.

Although Brody is the center, he is relatively helpless throughout the film until he finally destroys the shark. On land he caves into the townspeople and the Mayor. On the sea he is afraid of the water and ignorant of sailing skills. He is the perfect everyman authority figure for a generation who has

SPECIALE sored on the Vietnam conflict and other instances of establishment perfidy and yet is also tired of the “New” Hollywood anti-hero. Spielberg had already experimented with a likeable authority figure in *The Sugarland Express* (Steven Spielberg, 1974) where Captain Tanner (Ben Johnson) is sympathetic to the fugitives and is often unable to contain the more aggressive pursuers. Brody is even less effective than Tanner and resembles the isolated David Mann (Dennis Weaver) in Spielberg’s *Duel* (1971). Brody is unable to get Hooper and Quint to working as an effective team. This failure results in Hooper and Quint succumbing individually to the shark. Only Brody manages to get off a rifle shot at the very end that destroys the shark. But the happy ending is not the result of a plan or a strategy. Rather than insisting that Spielberg’s “Hawksian fallacy” is the result of lesser artistry or storytelling skills as Bernardoni does, I think it is time to put together these deviations from Hawks’ formulas and disaster movie moralism to measure the effectiveness of the break that *Jaws* makes from the previous aesthetic regimes.

Changing Scales in Order to Shock

Jaws obviously was embraced by the American audience for its deliverance of direct thrills as pleasures. This is the payoff for abandoning the moral plot points. The Schadenfreude aspects of the novel had been discarded in order to yield more screen time and to facilitate shooting strategies delivering visceral shocks and fears. Unlike the Allen films where the camera viewed the stars at a distance, Spielberg’s camera was an intimate part of the action. The very prescient Pauline Kael told us at the time *Jaws* was released that her friend, another film director, told her that Spielberg “must have never seen a play: he’s the first one of us who doesn’t think in terms of a proscenium arch. With him, there’s nothing but the camera lens”. The camera is constantly restless.

The obscene intimacy of the first shark attack on the naked woman swimmer (following the shark’s point of view of her body in the water silhouetted against the night sky) sets up a long period of anticipated attacks and shocks. The camera never shows the shark, never dips below the water line where she is being killed. We see only the terror of the swimmer as her body is pushed to and fro. This can be contrasted with the presentations of death in a disaster movie which is almost always from a distance (a virtual proscenium arch) that gives the audience the space to engage in judgment. A notable instance is when Bigelow decides to dash into the burning room to summon help. After an initial point of view shot of the flames we see Bigelow in a long shot stumbling through the flames until he finally succumbs and falls down. We see the entire room, we see his entire body. We are given distance to think about the action and consequence. As Susan Blakely, who played Patty in *Inferno*, recalls; the audience was supposed to wonder “...How [would] they act? Is it the better part of them that responds [to disaster]? Is it about helping people or your lower base self?”¹².

Jaws has no such interest in how we would act. Instead it crosses the line into forcing us to react. There are any number of ways this is done, none of these are particularly original although their preponderance shows a radical aesthetic at work. One strategy is overwhelming the audience with mismatches in scale. This occurs when the shark itself appears after an hour of running time. At this point the direct thrill comes from the shocking scale of the shark. The creature is first seen in the same frame as Brody, thus giving the audience the double jolt of how proximate it is to the protagonist and how big, how out of scale it is. It is outsized compared to the man, and the fishing boat. Spielberg confirms the audience’s panicked reaction by cutting to the reverse which features Brody’s panicked reaction. He extends the visceral fear through the third shot of Brody backing into the pilot house and announcing that “we are going to need a bigger boat.” The panic is finally release as Quint and Hooper jump into action.

Spielberg plays up the scale changes in a subsequent shot of the shark passing underneath the Orca.

SPECIALE Indeed the advertising campaign for both the book and the film featured a giant shark lurking underneath the relatively diminutive swimming nude. The shocking outsized scale was very important to Spielberg and helped drive up the budget costs of the movie since he needed a mechanical shark that could be in the same frame as the human actors. Gottlieb writes that "...Steven's directorial sense demanded that the film be shot with all the principals in the frame..."¹³. Action within the frame becomes the audience's nightmare as the shark starts ramming the boat and forcing Quint to slip into its jaws.

Notice how Kael's director positions Spielberg as the first of a new generation. Antonia Quirke also writes to this point: "Now Spielberg and his generation grew up frustrated in front of chunky stunt men in rubber suits pretending to be a creature from a lagoon... How strong the longing to see a monster and believe the [...] thing... He wants to make us see, even if in doing so we leave the world of make-believe and join the world of believe"¹⁴, *Jaws* is the movie that gives satisfaction to a generation who wants to experience things directly. They come back time after time to *Jaws* in order to substitute sensation for reflection and catharsis. Quirke's distinction between "make-believe" and "believe" suggests a new regime of realism at play in *Jaws*.

Photo Realism and the Blockbuster

The new realism could look a lot like the older logic of photo-realism. But there is a critical difference. The classic style had been built on a synthesis of documentary realism and fantastical illusion. The invitation to the audience to "make-believe" differed from genre to genre but the Hollywood genres, with the exception of animation, had a degree of photographic realism that facilitated make-believe. There had been a distinct up-tick in the degree of photographic realism after World War Two with such social problem films as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) and *The House on 92nd Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945). These films emphasized the use of locations that have an ontological relationship with the actuality of the story (as opposed to studio sets or generic locations). These movies coincide with the solidification of the post war new deal consensus. At this time the American people had the political will to expand the public sphere and, in line with developments in Europe and elsewhere, to adopt governmental policies to help with personal struggles within a capitalist framework.

New Hollywood, as defined by Peter Krämer¹⁵, should be interpreted as a continuation of this post war realism, particularly such films as *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) and *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969). Spielberg also was committed to location shooting, insisting on it in both his debut film *Duel* (1971) and with *Jaws*, despite strong budgetary pressures to shoot in the studio. But as Buckland notes, *Jaws* was otherwise a rejection of "new Hollywood sensibilities"¹⁶. The location shooting on *Jaws* was not an attempt to establish ontological relationship with historic shark attacks¹⁷. It was a rejection of studio trickery in order to move from make-believe to visceral affect. Spielberg wanted the audience to believe in their own presence at the beach and therefore needed a beach that would be a known resort. In addition the location allowed extensive camera movement. The first half of the movie had many expository scenes which often dissipate visual momentum. But Spielberg chooses a vigorous tactic (that he had learned from directing television) to maintain high energy within a single dialogue scene by using a tracking camera that goes through 180 degree and even a 360 degree turn. "It is an efficient and economical way of shooting a scene in a confined space while maintaining dramatic visual interest"¹⁸. Such movements were more easily plotted within the locations than they could have been within studio sets.

Thus the choice of location shooting was motivated by the need to make the audience believe and the desire to have flexible options with the shooting. It was not the photo-realism of tying the story to an actual pre-filmic world (forming an indexical bond). Since the make-believe factory of Hollywood had largely disappeared so did the habit of using re-cycled costumes and sets. They were now made from scratch to higher standards for each individual film. Spielberg realized this could be done as easily on

SPECIALE location as it was previously done on the studio lot. In the “believe” aesthetic every element would be tweaked. For example in the aftermath of *Jaws*, sound effects and sound environments became very important. The coming digital age would be premised on the pre-existing condition that *Jaws*’ audience reveals: the love of a synthetic reality. Synthetic reality may be the very definition of the inauthentic for an older generation. But *Jaws* crystallized the new aesthetic with a new promise; that no longer will the call to make-believe require a viewer to work much in order to suspend disbelief.

Conclusion

Jaws had increased the thrill factor for the audience while reducing the opportunities in engage in judging the characters. Previous movies had also done this. In *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), Hitchcock had dramatically turned his back on classic Hollywood moralism by showing the female protagonist engaged in larceny and then killing her off in order to redirect the movie into an arc of increasing terror. But the influence of *Psycho* was slow in emerging. Spielberg was one of many borrowing from Alfred Hitchcock’s bag of shocks and tricks. What the younger director did was take Hitchcock’s interest in shock and combine it with a new emphasis on making the audience believe. In contrast to the old master, he did not use sets, painted backdrops and worked zealously to eliminate traces of optical shots and other tricks. Spielberg left Hitchcock behind in the world of make-believe.

The next set of blockbusters after *Jaws* took the skills that Spielberg had demonstrated in manipulating the audience and applied them to the fantastic. Now the point was to make the audience believe in the unreal such as the mythological world of science fiction in *Star Wars* or the appearance of extra-terrestrials in Spielberg’s follow up movies *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) and *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1983). Indeed the ad line for *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) was “you will believe a man can fly”. The fact that *Jaws* led to this wave fourteen years after *Psycho* suggests a deeper coincidence with the audience desire than the earlier film.

This was also a break with the “New” Hollywood of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Graduate*. These films rejected Hollywood moralism in the name of a new moral standard of authenticity and self-fulfillment. Spielberg had little interest in the anti-hero of that cycle, especially after the relative lack of success of his first feature film *The Sugarland Express*. *Jaws* and its successors were not interested in a newer or better morality. These films were complementary to the American audience’s loss of interest in public matters and moral issues of responsibility and collective actions¹⁹. The overwhelming event of *Jaws*’ release was proof of Spielberg’s extreme sensibility. “[*Jaws*] respects its audience as equal...”²⁰. Indeed the post *Jaws* blockbusters anticipate a highly mobile audience no longer identifying as a collective but as individuals watching whatever whenever with the technologies of video, cable and not too far into the future, the internet.

It is not as if Spielberg knew this or consciously rejected the aesthetic of photo-realism. Morris and others defend Spielberg at length from the consequences of the big budget movie making that overwhelmed America after *Jaws*²¹. These defenses may help us evaluate him as a filmmaker but they are not quite to the point of why *Jaws* is a break. The filmmaker did not intend his film to break from classic Hollywood, although he obviously felt he was competing with disaster films²². But he had stumbled upon a more intense way of involving the audience as he was tossing out the usual disaster movie formulas. It is more useful to identify the audience as the agent who embraced the turn away from the moralism of “make-believe” to the thrill ride of visceral “belief.”

Both Allen and his fellow disaster producers suffered declining box offices almost in direct reverse correlation with Lucas/Spielberg’s increasing share. In general as Hollywood turned to the new sensibility a stable box office was established after a decade of volatility and, at least, two major studios flirting with bankruptcy²³. Now would be a period of unparalleled technological improvements in making and

SPECIALE distributing the film. Hitherto, we have written as if the technological improvements were the spur to the cinema of synthetic realism. *Jaws* reminds us that the audience had already embraced this new realism even when Spielberg had nothing more at his disposal than Cecil B. DeMille. As is usual in the history of style, the aesthetic change preceded the technological facilitation of such a change. Spielberg's continuous refinement of synthetic realism culminates in *Jurassic Park* seventeen years after *Jaws*. At the same time he turns towards making films about actual history such as *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Amistad* (1997), *Munich* (2005) and *Lincoln* (2012). It seems that as a filmmaker he is returning to the older virtues of Hollywood's historical films and bio-pics. But is he trapped by his new aesthetic? This turn towards history does not reinstate the photo-realism of the earlier Hollywood models that the director had studied²⁴. He continued to be eager to please the audience with a synthetic realism until the new millennium revealed the endings of American progress. His latter movies such as *Munich* and *Lincoln* engage moral issues although even here his camera work does not allow the reflective distance that Irwin Allen would have provided. Forty years later, what was once the American *Jaws* audience has become global and perpetuates the aesthetic of what is now labelled digital realism. The very fact that movies are designed for an international audience has lessened the moral/political content that once even entertainments such as disaster movies once presumed. Spielberg, himself, has taken a direction that diverges from *Jaws* (which he never considered his most expressive accomplishment). But the legacy of the movie is strong among such other directors as James Cameron, Michael Bay and Roland Emmerich. The *Jaws* anniversary asks us to consider the relationship between digital realism and the cultural diminution of public morality.

Frederick Wasser

Note

1. Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-Rock-N-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*, New York, Simon and Schuster 1998.
2. Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood", in Jim Collins (ed.) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, New York, Routledge 1993, pp.8-36.
3. J. Hoberman, *The Magic Hour: Film at fin de siècle*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press 2003.
4. Jean-Pierre Geuens, *Film Production Theory*, Albany NY, State University of New York Press 2000, p. 18.
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10. Ken Feil writes that the disaster film's overly serious script elements made them prime targets for "camp" appreciation, while Spielberg and Lucas enjoy a genuine relationship with the audience because they embrace pop culture, K. Feil, *ibid*.

- SPECIALE** 11. Peter Krämer has researched Hollywood's internal understanding of its audience in 1975. He argues *Jaws*' appeal to young adults was more specific to the male segment than *Star Wars* and subsequent blockbusters. Nonetheless he demonstrates the canniness of *Jaws*' reach to the audience. Peter Krämer, "A truly mass audience: Movies and the Small Screen in the mid-1970s", paper presented at the 18th Annual IAMHIST Conference 'Broadcasting and History, History and Broadcasting' Leeds UK, July 1999.
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