Universidad de Alcalá

-Final essay
Film analysis: Jaws

Film History and Theory

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Index

1. Introduction

1.1. Film credits

- Film Title: *Jaws*

- Year: 1975

- Country: United States

- Production Company: Universal Pictures and Zanuck/Brown Productions

- Genres: Adventure, drama and thriller

- Producers: David Brown and Richard D. Zanuck

- Director: Steven Spielberg

- Screenwriters: Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb

- Based on the novel by: Peter Benchley

- Director of Photography: Bill Butler

- Production Designer: Joe Alves

- Special Effects: Robert A. Mattey

- Film editor: Verna Fields

- Music: John Williams

- Actors of the most important characters:

    Roy Scheider as Chief Martin Brody

    Richard Dreyfuss as Matt Hooper

    Robert Shaw as Quint

    Lorraine Gary as Ellen Brody

    Chris Rebello as Michael Brody

    Murray Hamilton as Mayor Larry Vaughn

    Carl Gottlieb as Meadows

    Jeffrey Kramer as Deputy Hendricks

    Lee Fierro as Mrs. Kintner

- Most recognised awards:

    1976. Oscars: Best Film Editing, Best Music and Best Sound.

    1976. Golden Globes: Best Original Score.
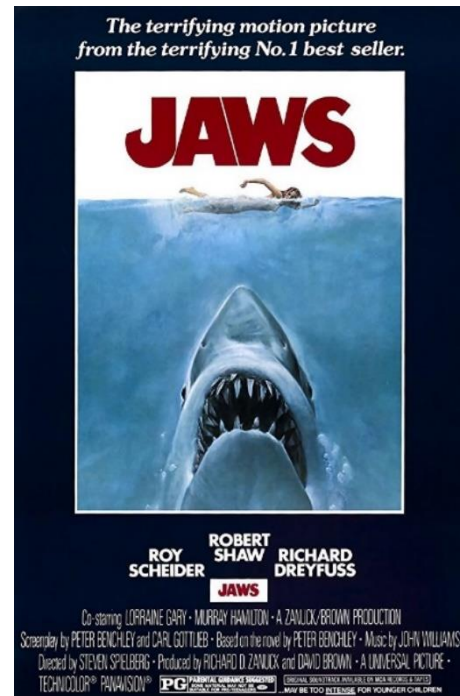
    1975. BAFTA Awards: Best Music.

Figure 1: Film poster from Jaws.

1.2.Synopsis

MARTIN BRODY is the police chief of a small island in the United States called Amity. He has just moved out from New York with his wife and their children. One day, in this apparently peaceful island, a girl disappears and, hours later, parts of her corpse are found on the beach. Medical inspector tells Brody that the girl probably died because of the attack of a shark. After knowing this information, chief Brody wants to close the beaches, but MAYOR LARRY VAUGHN and several of the local businessmen persuade him to back out his decision. They don't want to close the beaches because the tourism is the main business of Amity, and if the beaches are closed, probably tourists wouldn't go that summer to their Island.

The life in Amity continue as if nothing had happened, but chief Brody still worried about the security of the beaches. One day, the shark attacks again. This time it kills a kid in front of chief Brody. Now it is clear that there is a shark surrounding the island, and the mayor and the businessmen can't deny it. They begin to act against the shark. A local businesswoman has decided to offer $ 3000 for the one who kill the shark. An old fisherman called QUINT says that he would only do it for $ 10000. A lot of fishermen are trying to kill the creature. Meanwhile, MATT HOOPER, from the Oceanographic Institute, arrives on the island.

Some fishermen celebrate that they have captured a shark, but Hooper is convinced that that shark is not THE shark. Brody and Hooper, after investigating in the ocean, discover that the shark that is attacking the islanders is a great white, but the mayor still refuses to close the beaches.

The fourth of July arrives, and a lot of tourists arrives too. The beach is full of people. Brody, fearful, ask his eldest son if he could go to the pond instead of going to the beach, believing that there he would be safe. Suddenly, a shark fin appears on the beach and everybody panic. When everyone is out of the water, it is discovered that the shark is a fake made by two kids. The real shark is in the pond, where Brody's son is. Fortunately, the boy is safe. This experience convinces the mayor to hire Quint for kill the shark.

Quint, Hooper and Brody board a boat and goes in search of the great white. When they found it, they start to shoot it harpoons with barrels tied on them. These barrels hinder it from sink in the depths, forcing it to rise to the surface. The shark is very difficult to hurt, so Hooper try to inject it poison getting close to it in his cage. This goes wrong but Hooper still alive hidden under the water. The boat starts to sink, and the shark eats Quint. Finally, Brody put a compressed air tank inside the shark's mouth and the he shoots to it. This makes the tank explode, and the entire shark explodes too. Hooper returns to the surface, and together they come back to the island by swimming.

2. Historical and cultural context

During those years, United States was in the middle of the Cold War, even though the worst events have already past, the world is still divided in two. The same year *Jaws* was premiered, 1975, the Vietnam War came to an end. This was the first military defeat of the United States. This war began in 1959 and causes a wave of controversies and protests in the United States. More than 58.000 American soldiers died fighting in this conflict. Vietnam War created a remorse feeling in American's population, who considerate it an unjust war. It is also considered the first televised conflict in history. This allowed the denunciation of the frequent violations and abuses against Human Rights committed by both sides (Ruíz-Healy, 2015).

During the 70s United Stated had some shifts. Americans had much scepticism toward government because of the trauma of Watergate and the already mentioned tragedy of Vietnam, also cultural legacies from the 60s became more mainstream, a huge part of the society rejected racial segregation and sexuality outside of traditional marriage became more accepted, to sum up, the 70s was a decade of personal liberation, rebellion against authority and new popular culture influenced and formed by the movies from Martin Scorcese and Roman Polanski, the punk rock or the irreverent humour of *Saturday Night Live* (Schulman, 2001).

Regarding to the cultural context, specifically in the cinematographic area, the outlook was very different to the current one. In the beginning of the 70s, a big part of the

budget went to famous stars salary, not to special effects. As consequence of some movies' financial failures as Cleopatra (Wanger & Mankiewicz, 1963), Hollywood was fleeing from big investments.

Overproductions were used to be premiered during Christmas season because of the holidays. It was unusual to premiere an overproduction in summer, because years back cinemas didn't have air conditioning, so people barely went to theatre to watch movies during this season. Premiering in Christmas also had the advantage that is near the date of the ceremony of the Oscar Awards, so it could rekindle sales of tickets for watching the film.

It was usual to premiere a film gradually. First, it was projected in a few cinemas from big cities like New York or Los Ángeles. Later, it arrives to other cities. At the end, the film finally reaches the countryside and small villages. Movie studios used this method trusting in the word of mouth and the spread of the fame of the movie. That's why they spent just a small quantity of the budget in advertising and publicity.

This started to change in 1972 when *The Godfather* (Ruddy & Coppola) were premiered in 400 cinemas at the same time. This was a new strategy never seen before, and it worked, *The Godfather* was a success. In 1975 *Jaws* imitated the strategy of *The Godfather*, in fact, *Jaws* even duplicated the number of cinemas in which the film was premiered simultaneously.

Jaws made a whole new strategy of marketing based on the publicity, being premiered in summer and in a lot of cinemas at the same time. All of this for recover the huge investment they did. This movie became the first modern blockbuster.

3. Deconstruction

3.1. Narrative form

The story is told in a chronological order and in a linear way, and from Brody's point of view, he is the main character. The story is divided in three acts. The Act One began when the film began too.

The film starts with Chrissie's death, that is the Inciting Incident, because it is what makes people of the island break the routine. That is the began of the conflict, the arrival of the shark. The climax of Act One is when the shark eats Alex Kintner, this tragedy confirms Brody's concerns, there is a shark surrounding the island. This act ends with Quint proposal of kill the creature in exchange for $10,000.

Act Two starts with Brody reading about sharks. In this act Hooper arrives and a tiger shark is caught. Hooper is sure that the tiger shark is not THE shark, later Brody and Hooper discover that the shark that is attacking the beaches of the island is a great white. After that, the shark attacks again in the fourth of July, and that makes the Mayor agree at last to contract Quint. The Mayor has been the main obstacle for the characters all film long till this point. The Midpoint of the film, the big twist, is when Quint, Hooper and Brody goes to the sea in search of the shark.

In the second part of Act Two they start to harpoon the shark with the barrels. The Crisis comes when the boat is attacked by the beast, what makes the boat starts to sink. This is also the Climax of Act Two.

Act Three starts with Hooper's plan. He goes into the submarine cage with poison for killing the shark. At this point the Climax of Act Three starts. Plan goes wrong, Hooper flees and hide in the bottom of the sea. The ship is still sinking, and it is getting worse. Quint is eaten by the shark. Brody is alone. When Brody finally shoots to the tank that is in shark's mouth and it explodes is the final of the Climax of Act Three. When Hooper and Brody start to swim to the island it's the end of Act Three and also the end of the film.
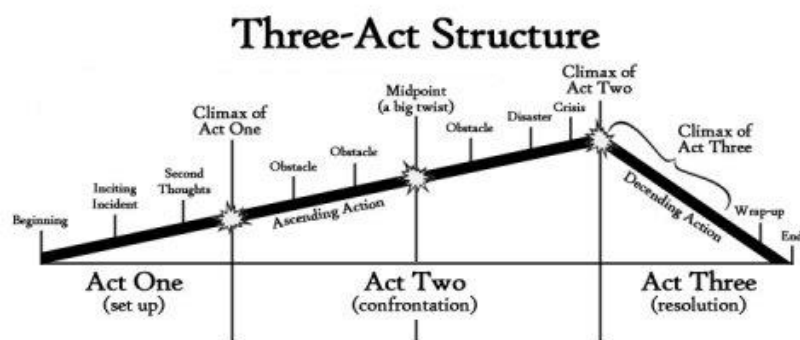

Figure 2: Diagram of a Three-Acts narrative structure.

Under the surface of this suspenseful monster movie there is a powerful character journey. I once believed this movie is simply about Brody overcoming his fear of water. It is about much more than that. […] Brody is also dealing with symptoms rather than tackle the causes head-on. He tells his son not to play on the swings rather than repairing them. In the same way he tells his wife not to use the fireplace in the den before he goes out on the sea. In the course of the story, Brody will learn to dig to the heart of the problem and resolve it at the root. (Segers, 2008).

3.2. Mise-en-scène

One of the most remarkable mise-en-scène keys from this movie are the subjective shots from the point of view of the shark. But, originally, these shots were not planned. At the beginning, Spielberg wanted to film all shark's shots using the animatronics, as these robots had

Figure 3: The mechanical shark.

malfunctions he had to look for an alternative. He needed ways to introduce the shark without showing it, so Spielberg asked himself: What would Hitchcock do in my place?

Spielberg admitted that without shark breakdowns his film would not have been so creative. He started applying narrative techniques more typical of suspense: he did not show any shark, but he made us understand that he was there, which ended up being much more effective. When the mechanical shark finally appeared on screen, Spielberg had already put the audience in his pocket with unexpected shots in which nothing could be seen but horror could be sensed. (De Gorgot, n.d.).

Another remarkable shot is the "Vertigo shot", also known as "dolly zoom". Using this kind of shot the person stays the same, but the background changes dramatically. This effect is made "moving the camera physically away or towards the subject ("dollying")

while zooming in or out (changing the focal length of lens)" (Stripek, 2012). The name comes from the film Vertigo (Hitchcock, 1958), the first movie in which this shot was used. In Jaws we can watch this effect in Brody when he sees the boy being attacked by the shark in the beach.

Regarding to other topic about composition, it is used in the film to show characters growing as people. For example, at the beginning of the movie, when Mayor talks with Brody, the Mayor

Figure 4: The "Vertigo shot".

takes up three quarters of the screen, what shows Brody's inferiority. As the film progresses, Brody gains space in screen because he is also gaining respect and power in the story, and when he makes team with Hooper they achieve to takes up more screen than the Mayor (Lim, 2014).

Figure 5, 6 and 7: Evolution of Brody and Mayor conversation shots.

The colour that dominates the movie is the blue, especially because a big part of the movie was filmed outdoors, so you can see the sea and the sky frequently. This colour means and express calm and serenity, but when you see the blue ocean knowing that

there is a man-eater beast there, you feel that that is just the calm before the storm. As blue means calm and red means danger, in shark's attacks scenes both contrast a lot in screen (Lim, 2014).

Figure 8: Contrast between blue and red.

3.3. Acting

The casting for the three main characters (Brody, Hooper and Quint) was very hard and difficult, but at the end the choose the actors: Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw. Scheider and Dreyfuss were nominated twice to the Oscars,

Figure 9: Quint, Brody and Hooper.

in fact Drayfuss won in one of those nominations. On the other hand, Richard Shaw was an actor with a long career, que began in 1947 and acted in 65 movies or TV series in all his life.

During the filming, Drayfuss and Shaw had many problems because they hated each other. One day, Dreyfuss threw a glass of bourbon that Shaw was dringking out the window. Spielberg said about that that "It got ugly. But it was also Quint and Hooper living out that relationship as Shaw and Dreyfuss" (Scott, n.d.). This could make their relationship in the movie more authentic, they even made amends during the filming of Quint's famous USS Indianapolis speech, just like their character.

In that mentioned scene in which Shaw had to do the monologue about USS Indianapolis speech, they had another problem. Shaw told Spielberg that in the scene the three characters had been drinking, and he thought he could do much better his speech if Spielberg let him drink before filming. Spielberg gave him permission, and later Shaw was so drunk that they had to be helped because he couldn't get in the boat on his own (Scott, n.d.).

The acting of these three main characters was good, each of them are great actors. Even the kids that appeared in the movie acted very well despite their age. On the contrary, some extras in the film overacted a little bit, especially in the scenes of panic and horror.

Figure 10: Extra slightly overacting.

3.4. Cinematography

As most of the film was shot outdoors, prevail the natural lightning. This kind of lightning gives the scenes more realistic. In scenes with natural lightning they used essentially two techniques, darkness for creating a scaring atmosphere, and lightning for calmness (kellyellis1998, 2015). Despite this, they achieved to make scaring the scenes in which the shark was attacking in broad daylight.

Spielberg usually use a style of lightning that he calls "God light" (spaceship's light, sun's shafts breaking through the clouds, etc). But in this movie, he wasn't really interested in the possibilities of light, as we have already said most of the scenes had a

naturalistic light style without calling attention to itself, except one. When Brody and Hooper take the boat out, and then they discover Ben Gardiner's boat attacked by the shark. In this scene the light comes from a realistic light source, as in the rest of movie, this time Spielberg is using this light to give a mystery and danger feeling to the scene, this even has a touch of science fiction feeling (Freer, 2015).

> This light peering through the window of BG's boat is maybe the most Spielberg-y thing in the whole of Jaws. When we cut to a wide, top shot of Hooper's gadget-filled boat, the lights creating pools of yellow around the boat and turning the black sea a milkier blue. A retro reading might recast as Spielberg's first space ship, a technological wonder filling a dangerous world with light and magic. (Freer, 2015).

Figure 11: Boat's light.

3.5. Production Design

Most of the film was shot in an island called Martha's Vineyard, in Massachusetts. The island gives you the feeling of being surrounded by the danger, because you are cornered by the sea, the shark's field. In addition, this is a island for enjoy your holidays, it represents the serenity, amusement, enjoyment and the calmness of the summer holidays in the beach, what contrasts with the tragic events that also take place there.

As this film was shot in 1975, everyone who appears in it had the style of that time, the glasses, the hair, the clothes… There is a lot of scenes in the beach (the danger zone), so in that scenes most people go in swimsuit, what makes you feel even more vulnerable.

For the shots of the animatronic shark the producers had think to film that in a water tank, because that is what everyone in Hollywood did, film sea scenes in water tanks. In contrast to the rest of Hollywood, Spielberg didn't want to shoot in a water tank, he insisted that he wanted to film in the ocean.

> He demanded realism and insisted, for example, in filming the real marine horizon when the three main heroes embark to hunt the shark, because he thought that this was the only way to convey to the public the feeling of loneliness and helplessness that the characters would feel in the middle of the ocean. (De Gorgot, n.d.).

The salt water made the shark had malfunction, so it had to be rebuilt, this made the budget tripled (De Gorgot, n.d.). Spielberg's decision was very expensive for the studio, the entire film was very expensive. The producers just wanted to make a low budget film, but this did not end up like that.

For this movie they had an original budget of $8.5 million, but it has been reported that it increased to 10, 11 and 12 million (Hall, 2002). This amount raised when they were shooting, they had planned to shoot 55 days, but it really took 150 days because of the difficulties: "anchoring boats, fighting the ocean and trying to get the mechanical shark to work" (Falk, 1981, p. 174). "These difficulties exacerbated by commencing too early, to circumvent a national screen actors' strike, delayed the unit in Martha's Vineyard during the expensive summer season, when real holiday crowds interfered with background continuity, causing further holds-ups" (Morris, 2007, p. 44).

3.6.Soundtrack

The original soundtrack of *Jaws* is made by John Williams. This soundtrack made Williams won his second Oscar (first Oscar to his own music) and confirmed his relationship with Spielberg as colleagues.

First, let's talk about the main theme, the mythical one. John Williams composed a theme with so much personality that it was used as a *leitmotiv* (Pérez, 2014). You can hear it every time the shark is about to attack, or it is already attacking, so when this theme sounds it means that everyone in the water is in danger.

Figure 12: John Williams.

In fact, in the middle of the film, when two kids are pretending to pass themselves off as the shark, the *leitmotiv* is not played, because that kids are not the shark and people are not in danger. This, unconsciously, makes you feel that this scene is not risky before knowing that the shark is a fake, because you are not hearing the shark's theme.

John Williams were able to express through the score the terror and panic that may cause being near to a shark. He chose an instrument, the double bass, and used it to interpret the music that makes a shark approaching its prey. The same way Bernard Herrmann did with a violin in the shower scene of *Psycho*, Hitchcock's movie filmed in 1960 (Pérez, 2014).

The music score was composed with an orchestra, and each theme has its own characteristics:

> Some themes have romantic, impressionist and strawinskian reminiscences that are those related to the sea, such as the tracks No. 6 *Sea attack number one*, No. 7 *One barrel chase*, No. 9 *Night search*. There are also themes that exalt the epic-adventurer character, such as track No. 4 *Out to sea*, in which we often hear kongorlian fanfares. Also, dissonant tracks with serious sequences that denote the dramatic, terrifying, cunning and bloodthirsty of the animal as

the track No. 2 *Chrissie's death*, No. 5 *The Indianapolis story*, No. 10 *The underwater siege*. Even slight melodies that with a great tinge of irony represent the awkwardness and the delusion of the characters, for example in the track No. 3 *Promenade (tourists on the menu).* (Pérez, 2014, p. 156).

Other songs were also used for the soundtrack of this marvellous film. The most memorable one is *Spanish Ladies*, that is a traditional English shanty (IMDb). This song is sung by Quint and, later, almost at the end of the film, Hooper and Brody sing it with him.

3.7. Editing

Verna Fields was the editor of this film. She was also known as "Mother Cutter" because of her character hearty and maternal, she edited the films in her house, near the pool, it is said that it was a very comfortable place (Apple et al., 2004). She worked in more than 36 movies and, after Jaws, in 1976, she became the vice president of feature production at Universal Pictures ("Verna Fields", 1982).

As the mechanical shark gave so many problems because it didn't work properly, the editing was very important for made the creature looks realistic. All the disagreements that Fields and Spielberg had was in the scenes in which the shark appeared. Fields was always wanting to cut sooner while Spielberg wanted to show more from the beast. That's because Spielberg had been shooting for days trying to make the robot looks realistic and he didn't want to waste that frames, but he realised that longer shots make it just look like a huge white figure floating (Apple et al., 2004). Just a few frames made the difference, these shorter shots gave the shark more realism and made the audience feel the stress and the panic that they were supposed to feel.

Fields and Spielberg used to use a method in which each one had to stop the scene when they wanted to make the cut, and if both stopped the scene in the same frame they knew that that cut was well done (Apple et al., 2004).

4. Reconstruction

4.1. The film as a whole

Jaws was the first film to use fully and consciously a new commercial strategy based in dynamiting what the industry had considered safe and sensible for years. They had to risk because this was the only way they could recover their huge investment, and it was an absolute success. What could be the movie that killed Steven Spielberg's career, it turned to be a legendary and mythical film from this director. *Jaws* became the first movie of a new era of films, the blockbusters.

Filming this movie turned to be a challenge that proved Steven Spielberg's creativity, talent, imagination, and also, stubbornness. Through this movie, Spielberg consolidated his employment relationship with John Williams, who will be with him in almost all his movies. Spielberg also showed his resources and the influence that had Hitchcock over him.

This movie also meant a launch pad for some actors, especially for the actors of Brody and Hooper (Roy Scheider and Richard Dreyfuss respectively). They gained fame and recognition, what made them been more easily chosen for important characters in movies.

This movie was so popular because the homonymous novel was a best seller at that time, but also could influence that the plot of the movie talks about the unethical that the capitalism could be. Those years in United States had a feeling of rebellion against authority and government, and the symbol of this country is the exaggerated capitalism. So, people could see in this plot a message of how harmful and unethical their country could be moved by the capitalism.

However, all the people who made this movie used their disciplines (directing, editing, music, acting, designing, producing, etc) to mix them in the perfect (and a little messy) way creating a masterpiece that make you feel stress and panic as if you were in that beach.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summarize and set your personal approach to the film

I decided to analyse this film because I have always heard interesting facts about it, and just a few months ago I watched the movie and I found it amazing. It is incredible how a movie made 43 years ago can be tenser than a current movie. After watching the movie, the facts and information about it became even more interesting for me. So, this essay was an opportunity for research more about this film.

I knew that they had problems filming *Jaws*, but I couldn't imagine that they had so many problems! I think that it is incredible how a disaster like that could become a mythical blockbuster that meant so much for the cinema environment of its era. This made me think that you never know about the future of a film, it is a mystery what would be the result.

It is not a complex or tiresome movie, it is enjoyable, exiting and entertaining, the perfect film for a Sunday afternoon, for example. It may have some slow moments, but even so it is a quite dynamic movie. But the most wonderful thing of this movie for me is the music, I think that is brilliance, absolutely enveloping.

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