

Filmic techniques used in jaws essay



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Steven Spielberg directed the epic blockbuster film, *Jaws*, alongside producers David Brown and Richard D. Zanuck. He is an American film director, producer, screenwriter and undoubtedly one of the most influential personalities in the history of filmmaking. Additionally, Spielberg is the highest grossing filmmaker of all time and his movies have earned in the region of four billion dollars internationally! He is also eminent for the direction of numerous other films after the release of *Jaws*, such as: *E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*.

Over the span of his career, Spielberg's films have approached a diverse array of themes and genres. Throughout his earlier years, his adventure and sci-fi films were often renowned as typical of modern Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking; though in his later years as a director, he incorporated aspects of historical concern: war, slavery, terrorism and the Holocaust. The plot and events occurring throughout the course of *Jaws* were based upon the best-selling novel written by Peter Benchley. His previous works included the books: *Island*, *Creature* and *The Beast*-though none of these matched the success of *Jaws*.

Benchley was inspired by the Jersey Shore shark attacks which took place during the summer of 1916- in New Jersey. Unlike the film, which is a taut and cerebral thriller, the novel is an entertaining account of the genuine outcome of having a giant killer shark sucking the economy dry. Whilst the film is suggestive and direct, the novel is explicit and somewhat convoluted, including subplots of mafia relations in the community, marital infidelity and an implication of supernatural influence. The novel was then directed by Spielberg and adapted by Universal Studios for motion pictures.

If there was ever any justification for being petrified of sticking a toe in the ocean, it's Jaws! The tagline for the film, "Don't go in the water," indeed kept a lot of 1975 summer beachgoers and shark-hysterical swimmers wary; the film generated hysteria amid masses. Jaws was originally released in 1975, with use of a combination of methods which build suspense, tension and startle the audience. The tag line of the movie 'Don't go in the water' successfully sums up the plot, tone and overall theme of the film and creates an interest for those who want to discover the dangers lurking amongst the waters.

Spielberg integrates several factors that construct the film and impact the audience: a variety of camera angles to show facial expressions, diegetic and non diegetic sounds and precise organisation of the set and mise en scene. This allows the audience to associate signs and symbols with certain events; for instance, yellow is used as a signifier throughout the film. Historically, Spielberg was the first person to direct a "human vs. shark" film! In general, Jaws follows the novel from which it derives its title, however Spielberg downplayed certain aspects of the plot in favour of suspense and action.

It has been regarded as a watershed film in motion picture history and became one of the first high concept films. The classification rating for Spielberg's film is age twelve, due to the general suspense, tension and overall petrifying and horrific scenes. Jaws is widely regarded as one of the greatest films of all time, including holding the title of number forty eight on American Film Institute's 100 Years... 100 Movies. Spielberg's masterpiece—arguably his best work—set the benchmark for summertime blockbusters and so far few have been able to match its sheer ability to grip an audience.

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The film received many critics, some saying “ it’s a white-knuckle ride into terror” and others saying “ Jaws has changed the course of film making. ” However, generally most people concur that the film stood the test of time and will never be forgotten. Amity Island is the fictional setting for the film Jaws, which was filmed at a traditional summer holiday retreat known as Martha’s Vineyard and became the site of the dramatic series of shark attacks. Martha’s Vineyard is an island situated off the south of Cape Cod, New England, in the United States of America.

This was an ideal filming location, as beach resorts are intended to be ideal places for tourists to escape their hectic daily lives; though in Jaws, the visiting tourists got more than they bargained for. The audience are later enlightened the name Amity, somewhat paradoxically, is recognised to mean friendly! The film tells a tale, where the once peaceful neighbourhood of Amity Island has been terrorised by a malicious and repugnant great white shark, which vanquished the serenity and shattered the peace-devastating the whole community around it.

The beast’s relentless behaviour posed a colossal threat to the island’s economy-especially with the 4th July was soon approaching. It was manifest that measures had to be taken to prevent it from rampaging through the tourist teeming waters. However, the town’s Mayor, Larry Vaughn, and the tourist board remained adamant that the beaches stayed open for the public holiday-which commemorated American Independence Day. This celebration honours the birth of the USA and it’s independence from Britain; though the escalation of fear had begun to detrimentally impact the amount of holiday-makers arriving at the resort.

Therefore it soon became apparent that if the beaches weren't going to close, it was up to Police Chief Brody, marine biologist Matt Hooper and fisherman Quint to pursue the menace and put an end to the bloodshed-protecting otherwise oblivious tourists. The musical overture at the beginning of the film gives the audience a taster of what to expect throughout the movie; this builds an anticipation of excitement and thrills. There have been several other movies (which were also followed by sequels) that have instantly recognisable overtures, for instance: James Bond, Indiana Jones and Star Wars.

The overture at the beginning of Jaws allows the audience to feel Spielberg's extreme attention to the mood of the first scenes, which is a crucial element of audience reception. The opening sequence of Jaws is lengthy and lasts for an entire five minutes. The Universal logo is the first to appear on screen as the movie opens, which quickly fades into the backdrop, plunging the audience into complete darkness for several seconds- showing that Spielberg had grasped the primal aspect of a darkened theatre. Non-diegetic music is used throughout this scene and mysterious and disturbing sounds permeate the theatre, before abruptly disappearing.

This can be compared to the behaviour of a shark, leisurely circling its prey, vanishing without warning and then ambushing the victim from an unknown quarter. Following the brief silence, the same two notes return, followed by another short silence and a repetition of the exact two notes-F and F sharp. Again silence followed, with a repetition of the notes again and six additional notes performed crescendo. This creates the effect whereby the audience

feel that something threatening is approaching closer and closer-though nothing among this nature is actually visible.

The use of crescendo creates a feeling of movement and distance, transforming the sounds into a highly visual element. This famous shark theme was composed by John William Ives and today it remains a highly recognised sequence of music. Jaws submerges the audience into a world of sounds, before imagery even appears on screen. This is a highly effective technique used by Spielberg, which conjures up many images for audiences with imaginative minds and engrosses them in the film. The overture can be said to announce how the film is organised; music often leads to images and some specific sounds often lead to the introduction of music.

For instance, when the corpse of a young girl is found by Brody's assistant, he uses a whistle to alert Brody, which is soon followed by the famous music. This is used as an extension of the whistle, which symbolises a reaction to the horror and dismay of the situation. The composer aims to grab the attention of the audience, showing the tone of the spectacle before the curtain opens; the music ends as darkness breaks and bursts forth into the opening scene of the movie. The opening shot shows underwater imagery with vivid seaweed in a surrealistic close-up.

This sequence was shot during daylight hours. The camera appears to move in the ocean current like a panicked crowd, creating the impression of moving through a dense jungle. The chaotic movement of the seaweed foreshadows the disorder and danger to come. When the movie title appears on screen, the pace of the music gradually increases and becomes more

frightening for the audience. At this point, the tone of the music and visual imagery informs the audience that the point of view is that of a monster-rather than a swimmer.

The camera appears to drift along the ocean floor, causing audiences to experience the feeling of being the hunter, as though they are seeking their prey. The image used is 'obsessive' because it is a one shot scene with no cuts. The music used repeatedly throughout Jaws resembles a person's heart beat, almost 'mirroring' the audiences' body and engrossing them as if they were inside the film. Spielberg has used this technique to build tension, interest the audience further and increase the suspense of the movie; this therefore holds the audiences attention so they continue watching.

Within the film, the audience observes and almost experiences one of their worst nightmares-the return of prehistoric creatures-where the mammoth shark appears to have returned from prehistory. Unlike the opening sequence, the next shot is filmed at night and has nothing in common with the first. Within the beginning few minutes of Jaws, Spielberg has made the audience dive into a cold, bitter and daunting underwater world, though this image is abruptly cut and interrupted. Spielberg then makes the audience face something entirely different; an image depicting youngsters huddled around a fire-who are unaware of the immediate tragedy.

The aim of the first shot is to inform the audience of the dangers, whilst the characters remain oblivious to what lies ahead-this is a use of dramatic irony. Meanwhile, a harmonica player is heard and another young man is seen strumming the guitar in the backdrop. This is a use of diegetic music.

There is a calm, tranquil atmosphere and these instruments don't evoke the violence expressed by the main title music. However, they are incorporated to reinforce the frustration of the audience, who remain powerless to prevent the impending slaughter.

Throughout this scene, both the beginning and ending are brought back to equilibrium; where the calm and peace is restored. This scene incorporates many features of a stereotypical thriller: tension building background music, the female character as the victim and the other character (who has the capability to save her) completely overlooking the situation altogether. Prior to the attack, shot reverse shot is used between the male and the female to illustrate the sexual attraction between them. The sounds within the scene are particularly well thought out; subtle and compelling sounds are used to signify certain things.

For instance, the soon to be shark attack victim (Chrissie) almost instantaneously turns her head in the direction of a seagull cry. Then as if the bird had 'called her' she stood up and ran towards the ocean, whilst undressing herself and leaving her body completely exposed, enforcing a sense of vulnerability. The camera shows Chrissie swimming out alone in the ocean, using a long high-angle shot. The diegetic music which had previously accompanied her had been faded out. This built suspense, causing audiences to feel anxiety.

The editing of this sequence uses quick, fast paced, frantic cuts of shots from different angles. Majority of the scene is shot from the shark's perspective, indicating in which direction the menace is coming from and reinforcing

Chrissie's helplessness. This also builds additional tension because the attack seems inevitable and causes the audience to automatically question 'will there be a fatality this early on in the movie?'. Spielberg immediately shows the killing of Chrissie to demonstrate the sheer power of the shark and this gives connotations of evil.

Additionally this shows that the signature music means that the shark is either nearing or about to attack. The camera gives the audience the shark's eye view, looking at the dangling legs of its prey. In conjuncture with the underwater imagery the music returns, alerting the audience that indeed something traumatic is going to follow. Cross-cutting is used during the attack scene, which glimpses back at the boy lying peacefully on the beach. This technique provides the audience with a slight glimmer of hope that the he may spot the commotion and come to her aid.

Within Jaws, Spielberg chose to use a whole orchestra-which came at quite a cost. Therefore the technique of using a simple 'eruption' of music startles the audience and alerts them that the scene is likely to end in catastrophe because the director has gone to this trouble. The tempo of the music increases quickly as the camera approaches the girl and gives reality to the shark's jaws-which Spielberg has prevented the audience from seeing. The beginning of the music begins quietly, gradually becoming louder and louder until the climatic ending-which becomes silent once again.

Spielberg successfully uses this technique as a representation of her death. The scene ends harshly and the young woman suddenly submerges as if the ocean- or more precisely the beast-had swallowed her whole. This is

emphasised by the camera shot which gradually fades out and the music is replaced by a horrific silence which shows that all the chaos has disappeared. Throughout the movie, Spielberg has incorporated a signifier which appears in close connection with the shark attacks. The colour yellow was worn by various characters that were either killed or impacted by the events.

Ironically, this specific colour has connotations of joy and happiness. For example: the dog owners t-shirt, Alex's lilo, his mothers hat and two quick flashes of yellow which also appeared on screen. This technique has been used by Spielberg to allow the more observant viewers to recognise when an event is about to occur. Jaws introduces the audience to Martin Brody (the principal character of the film) played by Roy Scheider. He is the newly appointed police chief of Amity, who came to the Island to escape the hassles of the New York lifestyle.

However, this soon backfired when the coroner alerted him about the shark infested waters when the mutilated body a young swimmer (who the audience know as Chrissie) washed up on shore. Spielberg specifically chose Scheider, who was at the pinnacle of his career in the mid-to late 1970s, to play this part. He brought a sense of humanity to his character and this made it easy for audiences to identify with him. Following the discovery of the young girl, Brody requested the assistance of a shark expert from the mainland.

In response to this, Matt Hooper (played by Richard Dreyfuss) examined the corpse and confirmed that it was indeed a shark attack. This frustrated the

mayor and his response to the situation causes audiences to develop a negative opinion of him. Although he was not a famous actor at the time, Dreyfuss infuses his character with energy, charm and dry-wit. Following confirmation of the cause of death, Broody hired a mid aged man known as Quint-who had experience as both a fisherman and a highly experienced shark hunter.

The actor who played Quint (Robert Shaw) was actually not Spielberg's first choice for this part and it was initially offered to Lee Marvin. Nevertheless, Shaw infused his character with a unique personality and mannerisms. The scene involving the shark's second and third attack was filmed at Joseph Sylvia State beach and began with a young boy, Alex, and focused upon him throughout. He was seen walking up from the shore towards his mother who was wearing yellow hat-indeed signifying disaster. A tracking shot was used to follow his every move, which implied that he'd play a vital role in the sequence.

This leads the audience to believe, for a split second, that he'll be the only fatality during this scene. However, for a brief moment the camera focuses on a man with his dog. Alike Alex's mother, the dog owner was wearing yellow-in the form of a t-shirt to be more precise. Much of Jaws is an exercise in elevating tension and this scene is no exception, as the audience are given a numerous potential targets. Spielberg then uses a high angle long shot as both Alex and the dog dash into the ocean, building tension and suspense and causing audiences to contemplate who will be harmed first.

The audience see shark the shark's point of view, which shows many of the swimmers from beneath and is similar to the scene where Chrissie was mutilated. At this point the camera switches to a mid-shot of Brody, who looks on anxiously. He appears to be almost convinced that something is disastrous is going to take place. Alike Brody, the audience are prepared for the tragic events that are soon to follow. The camera then briefly refocuses on the dog owner using a mid-shot, who was calling ' Pippet' repeatedly with no response. It becomes evident to the audience that this indeed is his dog's name, implying that he animal had been slaughter by the shark.

The use of cinematic techniques such as: camera shots, edits, colour, lighting, sound and mise en scene help to prepare the audience for the climax in this particular scene. Colour and lighting are used successfully in preparing the audience for the climax. At the beginning of the scene the ambience on the beach is pleasant and sunny; the scene is made to feel realistic with use of natural lighting that allows the audience to feel involved. Though as the scene progresses, the lighting appears to dim as the shark approaches and has connotations of danger and an increasing sense of insecurity.