Stop Blaming ‘Jaws’! (New York Times Article)



Illustration by Tom Gauld

By HEATHER HAVRILESKY

Published: August 1, 2013 [61 Comments](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/magazine/stop-blaming-jaws.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0#commentsContainer)

**The original “Jaws,”** released in 1975, was the first movie to make more than $100 million at the box office, and it has been blamed for every insipid summer blockbuster to hit the theaters ever since. For example: “ ‘Jaws’ whet corporate appetites for big profits quickly, which is to say studios wanted every film to be ‘Jaws,’ ” writes Peter Biskind in his 1998 book, “Easy Riders, Raging Bulls.” The movie’s success “single-handedly [drove] serious movies off the summertime calendar,” Walter Shapiro wrote in Slate in 2002. “Hollywood had been happy to hit for average,” John Podhoretz wrote in 2010 in The Weekly Standard. “After ‘Jaws,’ it began swinging for grand slams.”

As a business model, “Jaws” may well have upended the movie industry. Creatively, though, it’s increasingly strange to blame “Jaws” for spawning the modern blockbuster, given how little Steven Spielberg’s esoteric, character-driven story has in common with today’s action extravaganzas. Compared with movies like “Pacific Rim,” “World War Z” and “White House Down,” “Jaws” is an art-house film. And a very good one: the film built suspense by focusing on what you couldn’t see more than on what you could. The young swimmer, up to her shoulders in murky water. A boy’s dangling legs, viewed from under the water. A swaying fishing boat, creaking eerily in the darkness.

Even when the shark is attacking, what we mostly see is splashing in the dark, a screaming woman just before being submerged. “It speaks well of this director’s gifts that some of the most frightening sequences in ‘Jaws’ are those where we don’t even see the shark,” Frank Rich wrote in New Times. (Indeed, the shark’s close-up toward the end may represent the least dramatic moment of the whole film.)

This approach was perfectly in keeping with Peter Benchley’s novel, which for long stretches reads like a John Cheever tale of small-town adultery featuring intermittent appearances by a shark. “Jaws,” the movie, focused on an obsessed patriarch and police chief named Brody. His home life — as would become a Spielberg signature in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” and “E.T.” — was a disconcerting flurry of constant talk and movement, underscored by a buzzing thrum of domestic stress. The flocked wallpaper, the blaring telephone, a child’s bleeding hand: these details were designed to foreshadow the fact that the world is slipping out of our protagonist’s control. Throw in a manicured hand being eaten by crabs, a kid’s raft floating to shore with bite marks in it and a young son dragged from the water in shock as his mother yells, “He’s dead!” and you’ve got an unnerving tale of beach-town bliss gone horribly awry.

By contrast, no blockbuster filmmaker today would dare to build suspense by, say, having a greasy-looking alcoholic fisherman drag his nails across a chalkboard in a crowded room. Current audiences are assumed to be too impatient to sit through anything like the menacing monologue by Quint, the mercenary shark hunter. Yet the scene helped to intensify the film’s mood of impending doom. By the time Quint and Hooper got drunk on the boat and compared scars, the dread was palpable. Then Quint told the story of the Indianapolis. (“1,100 men went in the water, 316 men come out and the sharks took the rest.”) From that point forward, the tiniest splash of a minnow could set the audience shrieking.

This is really what “Jaws” was about: Not sharks, but fear. Not action, but suspense. That’s what made it possible for the story of a single shark to scare millions of people into avoiding 71 percent of the earth’s surface.

Suspense is a concept with which current blockbuster directors seem unfamiliar. Directors today build suspense by incinerating the top two floors of the White House or by making a dino-alien lay waste to the Golden Gate Bridge. But seeing the Eiffel Tower blown to smithereens or watching the Statue of Liberty topple sideways doesn’t make people afraid of visiting national landmarks — it just trains them to yearn for even splashier C.G.I. effects next year. The career of Roland Emmerich aside, you can’t blow up the White House twice. Next year you’ve got to blow up a city, a country, a planet. A few swimmers on a beach in Amity? Who cares? Every story now has to involve a threat to the entire globe. This is meant to raise the stakes, but it actually lowers them, both by removing the specificity of local places and individual characters and by making it impossible to go see an action movie today without also expecting to witness the demolition of some unfortunate metropolis.

Our absurdly inflated expectations coat the summer-movie experience with a sludgy layer of pre-emptive disappointment. We feel crestfallen before the first scene is even over. “Why aren’t there brains hitting the camera already?” we ask ourselves, reaching for another fistful of Whoppers. But the truth is, watching enraged alien monsters and enormous robots destroy the Hong Kong skyline can’t hope to match the nervy *frisson* of watching one big shark fin drawing slowly closer to three kids on a sailboat.

**I saw “Jaws”** in the theater when I was 5, and I’m still a little bit afraid of the ocean a few decades later. But the franchise itself ran aground almost immediately, for many of the same reasons that blockbusters as a genre have run aground. By the time “Jaws 3-D” came out in 1983, not only wasn’t it safe to go back in the water, but it also wasn’t safe to go back into a theater playing a “Jaws” movie, unless you were dying to see an enormous shark bust the glass of an aquarium at SeaWorld. Today blockbusters like “R.I.P.D.” (remember that one?) can have so little long-term cultural resonance that a low-budget rip-off like “Sharknado” attracts more attention and, by some measure, affection than do many of the multimillion-dollar films that it mimics.

Even if the frenetic, gimmick-heavy blockbuster bears little resemblance to “Jaws,” certain outliers do conjure the spirit of Spielberg’s original. “Children of Men,” “28 Days Later” and “District 9” all offer suspense, rich characters, evocative local settings and innovative storytelling, ingredients that could bring immediacy back to the summer blockbuster (even if those movies weren’t all summer films or box-office blockbusters). If nothing else, though, we should once and for all stop blaming “Jaws” for all the terrible summer movies and start crediting it for the few, rare good ones instead.

<img src="http://meter-svc.nytimes.com/meter.gif"/>