New Hollywood:
America and the Birth of Modern Cinema

Rich Johnson

Week 8

BIRTH OF THE BLOCKBUSTER

Heralded as the first ever blockbuster, Steven Spielberg's masterpiece *Jaws* devoured everything in sight during the summer of '75 and changed cinema forever. Paving the way for George Lucas' rebels in space (opera) *Star Wars* (1977) and Richard Donner's definitive *Superman: The Movie* (1978) all three films set the mould. Often replicated but never bettered these films set a high standard and, with cinema leaving the politics behind, the move was now towards mainstream entertainment. But in the wake of such behemoths is William Friedkin's overlooked *Sorcerer* (1977), released at the height of *Star Wars*' blockbusting; a forgotten tour de force that boasts one of the most incredible scenes committed to celluloid.

Main films:

Jaws (1975)
Director(s): Steven Spielberg
Studio(s): Zanuck/Brown Productions / Universal Pictures

Star Wars (1977)
Director(s): George Lucas
Studio(s): Lucasfilm / Twentieth Century Fox

Superman (1978)
Director(s): Richard Donner
Studio(s): Dovemead Films / Film Export A.G. / International Film Production

References to:

Sorcerer (1977)
Director(s): William Friedkin
Studio(s): Film Properties International N.V. / Paramount Pictures / Universal Pictures

Annie Hall (1977)
Director(s): Woody Allen

Studio(s): Rollins-Joffe Productions

Smokey and the Bandit (1977)
Director(s): Hal Neddham
Studio(s): Rastar

Notes:

First… the disasters.

Although blockbusters as we know them today began in 1975, the epic scale that has become associated with such films are intrinsically linked to disaster movies. A lost film until its rediscovery in 1981, Felix E. Feist's *Deluge* (1933) is generally considered the first. The film more than echoes the 1906 San Francisco earthquake; the West coast of America's fault line and imminent disasters all part of a drastic 'way of life' that has fed into their storytelling. There are even similar projections of 'disastrous imagery' o the screen echoing 9/11 just over 100 years later.

They often cross over with science fiction and, specifically, apocalyptical settings. British film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1961) is one of the best examples.

In Hollywood the '70s saw the peak; a Golden Age of disaster movies beginning with the release of *Airport* (1970). A huge success for its time it earned $100 million.

Other films included: *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Earthquake* (1974) and, arguably the best of the bunch, *The Towering Inferno* (1974). All these films stood out not just because of their scale and adventure but also the ensemble casts of movie stars. *Inferno* boasted Paul Newman, Steve McQueen, William Holden, Fred Astaire and Faye Dunaway to name a few. A mix of Golden Age and New Hollywood talent.

Successes.

The 10 Highest Grossing Movies of the '70s (Worldwide) were:

1. *Star Wars* (1977)
2. *Jaws* (1975)
3. *The Exorcist* (1973)
4. *Enter the Dragon* (1973)
5. *Grease* (1978)
6. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)
7. *Superman* (1978)
8. *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977)
9. *The Godfather* (1972)
10. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977)

As mentioned, it all begins on June 20th 1975 with the release of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*.

"You're gonna need a bigger boat." — Chief Brody

Although a notoriously difficult production going months over schedule and budget, Spielberg pulled off delivering one of the greatest movies ever made. One of the most instrumental (and intuitive) decisions made to save time was the use of POV; Spielberg forced to use the camera as the shark's perspective due to 'Bruce'* the shark not working.

*Named after Spielberg's lawyer.

On release the film broke all records; queues around the block and earning a record $7 million opening weekend, $21,116,354 in its first 10 days (recouping its production costs), earning over 123 million in total on first release. By the time it was rereleased in ''76 and '79 it had earned $130m with $260m in rentals.
A major part of the film's success was in beginning to role out films in more cinemas, *Jaws* opening in 409, unprecedented for the time.

The film devoured audiences, the shark literally exploding onto the screen.

It also signaled a major move from New Hollywood sensibilities to the 'excess' of Hollywood* which would be seen throughout the '80s with other cinematic sharks such as Gordon Gekko (*Wall Street*, 1987) epitomising capitalist attitudes. Blockbusters *printed* money.

*The EXCESS HOLLYWOOD course coming January 2023.

Leaving aside the Blockbuster legacy (for now), what makes *Jaws* such a pure and meticulous and pure piece of cinema? EVERYTHING. It's a simple story yet manages to be every genre from horror and thriller to comedic elements and drama, action, adventure. It has it all.

There's the iconic poster by artist Roger Kastel and…

Duh.. duh…

… the iconic music from John Williams.

Spielberg has always attributed half the film's success to Williams' score, *'Those two alternating notes - E and F or F and F sharp - represented something primal and relentless in the shark and our fear in* Jaws*.'* — The Daily Jaws The majority of Spielberg's films have been scored by Williams – absolutely one of the greatest cinematic partnerships.

'The great fish moved silently through the night water, propelled by short sweeps of its crescent tail.' — *Jaws*, Peter Benchley (1974)

Based on the book by Peter Benchley, the film strips away the soap opera elements and Mafia inspired storyline to focus on a classic 'three men in a boat tale'.

Benchley taps into familiar American literature. Essentially, it's the modern version of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) – Quint *is* Ahab - which only adds to its mythic nature and archetypes. There's a natural heritage there but, ultimately, primordial (and universal) storytelling.

Benchley has a cameo in the film as a news reporter on Amity Island announcing "… a cloud in the shape of a killer shark." Benchley would later regret how the success of the book and film led to the paranoia and culling of sharks and became involved in shark conservation. More information here.

Check out Carl Gottleib's *The Jaws Log* (1975), which is a brilliant insight into the production he was writing at the time. Also Mat Taylor's superb coffee table book *Jaws: Memories from Martha's Vineyard* (2012).

Jaws boasts one perfect shot after the next from the shark's-eye-view to its slow, chilling and obscured reveals, use of symmetry, balance and colour; yellow planted throughout to instill fear in the viewer.

There is some interesting symbolism throughout. Does the broken tooth-like fence running along the beach at the beginning preempt the attack? Hendricks slumped on the beach as he finds the remains, the jaws of the fence surrounding him in mid-ground. Or is it merely coincidental based on location? Either way, it all adds to the layers if you want to dig into the film.

Although the film *became* a blockbuster, it is easy to lose sight of how much the film still feels like a slice of New Hollywood. The film deals with character and 'moments'; the dinner table sequence a beautiful portrait of a family, fatherhood and the 'day job' that most people can relate to; whether you are the adult or child in the scene. There is also a brilliant documentarian element as the tourists arrive in Amity.

Perhaps the closest film to *Jaws* is Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) that not only places the action (and horror) in a sleepy seaside community but also leans very heavily into the 'Hitchcockian' suspension.

When the second victim, Alex Kitner, is killed there is a 'dolly zoom', also known as the 'Hitchcock zoom' (employed in *Vertigo*, 1958); an in-camera effect that appears to undermine normal visual perception. The effect is achieved by pulling in with the lens while the camera dollies (moves) away from the subject that is kept the same size in the frame throughout. The result is a disorienting feeling that helps emphasises fear.

Of course, there's the horror. Although rated a 12 by today's standard's it actually defined PG-rated horror Spielberg would more than often get away with in his career.

Jaws also has one of the greatest monologues. Known as the 'Indianapolis speech', the key moment is an excellent example of character development and a rare moment exposition works on screen. The speech was partly written by screenwriter Carl Gottlieb (who also plays Meadows in the film), an uncredited John Milius and actor Robert Shaw himself.

There are early examples of merchandise but has become more popular over time. Initially there was a *Jaws* 'snapping shark' game while in recent years al kinds of merch can be purchased from board games to highly detailed figures and other collectibles. But the film that really started the merchandise boom was the next blockbuster.

"These aren't the droids you're looking for." — Obi-Wan Kenobi

A 'new hope' for America? After a volatile period, Star Wars signaled a return to optimism and pure escapist entertainment.

The most expensive independent film ever made? Certainly one of them. There is some irony that Lucas himself, became the Empire.

The queues again. This time even bigger, with crowds upon crowds on opening day; May 25, 1977

Even by the first trailer's standards, it is easy to see how much the film could have just been a modest cult space fantasy.

But there was far more to it than that. Most of which can be attributed to George Lucas' world-building that mined the monomyth set out by Joseph Campbell and his exploration of the 'Hero's Journey in his books; most notably *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell's belief was that essentially humanity follows the same path and the same stories of self-discovery; parallels of which can be seen in archetypes such as the 'wise old man' prevalent in all these kinds of stories. For example, Obi-Wan Kenobi is no different to Gandalf or Dumbledore. Three separate fantasy stories but the same blueprint of characters and plot.

Of course, before we explore the world, the titles own the screen. Few credits other than the fanfare. This is a return to the serials.

The epic scale of the opening as the Star Destoyer looms over us in pursuit of a much smaller cruiser.

The opening crawl, sans 'A New Hope' or episode reference. That came later as the sequels were released and the Star Wars was reformatted as *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.

As mentioned, the film is a huge nod to the classic film serials George Lucas and his generation grew up on. The opening crawl, cliff hanger endings and space opera. In fact, Lucas originally wanted to remake Flash Gordon but could not acquire the rights, so he built his own universe instead.

Much like *Jaws*, *Star Wars* embraced the marketing with its classic poster designs. Amongst its 'used universe' aesthetic, designs paid homage to cinema itself from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress* (1958).

Iconic characters and the launching of three major stars in their own right. Mark Hamill, a superb voice actor and raconteur, the late Carrie Fisher (daughter of Golden Age star Debbie Reynolds and

Eddie Fisher) who find acclaim as a writer, and Harrison Ford; one the biggest movie stars of the past 50 years.

Then there are the toys 'n' shit. It's all pure pop culture.

It may all just be lunchboxes to some but Lucas, in retaining the merchandise rights helped to build his own Empire, which he went onto sell to Disney in 2012 for $4.05 billion, donating to education.

Notable films released that year were Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), comedies *Annie Hall* (1977) and the Burt Reynolds 'vehicle' *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977), also starring Sally Field.

But, one such film, from William Friedkin, was buried amongst the success of Star Wars. Few films could compete, even a month after the release. Friedkin's film, a remake of French thriller *The Wages of Fear* (1953), has one of the most incredible scenes you will *ever* see on screen. Filmed primarily in the Dominican Republic, this is Werner Herzog territory, Friedkin's 'Burden of Dreams', filming a truck moving across a rope bridge. A troubled production, it is no surprise when you see what he captured that the $15 million budget escalated to $22 million. It's a great film, if anything, worth watching for the bridge scene alone.

"They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you... my only son." — Jor-El

The birth of the superhero movie.

Also known as *Superman: The Movie* the next blockbuster delivers yet another landmark in cinema and popular culture.

Although considered the first superhero 'movie', there was an earlier independent production and precursor to the TV series the '50s TV series *Superman and the Mole Men* (1951) starring George Reeves. Another early superhero 'movie' is *Batman: The Movie* (1966) that also tied into the original TV series.

"SUPERMAN! Champion of the Oppressed! The physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!" — *Action Comics* #1 (cover dated June 1938)

Superman's first appearance was in *Action Comics* issue #1, cover dated June 1938. He is considered be the first 'super' hero and a major part of American popular cultures; the superhero the modern American mythology.

He has remained a hugely popular character in comic books, TV series and the movies for over 80 years.

Directed by Richard Donner (1930-2021). Not only has Donner delivered what most would say is the greatest superhero movie ever made, as a brilliant genre filmmaker, he has delivered one of the

best horrors with *The Omen* (1976), one of the best kid's movies with *The Goonies* (1985) and one of the best action movies with *Lethal Weapon* (1987), plus the sequels.

Superman remains the blueprint for what has followed in the genre. It mixes the classic disaster movies and ensemble approach with the bright coloured optimism ripped from the pages of the comic books. Just what America was looking for post-Vietnam. This was a new kind of 'movie' and one that also symbolised 'hope'… but also perfect for the old school mentality of 'Truth, justice, and the American Way'.

Once classic sequence after the next. A 'comic book' movie, for sure, but one with a great deal of heart and weight. This can be seen in the opening sequence, a homage to his beginnings, but also the death of Jonathan Kent played by Glenn Ford.

An unknown at the time, Christopher Reeve's performance as Superman is unrivalled. It's all in the posture and mannerisms; an absolute delight to watch.

Richard Donner and his wife helped to produce *X-Men* (2000), one of the first Marvel superhero movies. Some would say, 'The beginning of the end of cinema as we know it', the landscape heavily dominated by the genre ever since.