Spielberg's 'Jaws' (1975) and High-Concept Cinema

Steven Spielberg's critically acclaimed 1975 thriller '*Jaws'* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1975) is a film that Justin Wyatt, in *'High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood'* lists as an example of a 'high-concept' film. High concept films are, at least in part, *"*designed to maximize marketability and, consequently, the economic potential at the box office" (Wyatt, 1994 p.15), and are largely categorised by their marketing alongside their narrative. This essay will examine and discuss 'high concept' cinema through an analysis of Justin Wyatt's writing and its relevance to Spielberg's *'Jaws'*.

Wyatt defines 'high concept' cinema through analysing its historical significance in Hollywood cinema. As he writes, "high concept represents one strand of post-classical Hollywood cinema: a style with strong ties to the classical cinema, yet with some significant deviations in terms of composition" (Wyatt, 1994 p.16). However, he places focus predominantly on the relationship between narrative and marketability. Sven Jockel and Thomas Dobler describe high-concept as marketing that "aims to create a film that can be easily announced in a 30 sec teaser or television ad" (Jockel and Dobler, 2009 p.86). Seemingly in agreement with this definition is Spielberg himself, whom Wyatt quotes as saying "if a person can tell me the idea in 25 words or less, it's going to make a pretty good movie. I like ideas, especially movie ideas, that you can hold in your hand." (Spielberg, cited in Wyatt, 1994 p.13).

However, both Wyatt and Jockel and Dobler's definition of high-concept cinema specifically does not require new or original ideas. The success of high concept films depend on repetition of

narratives that have already been well-received or have been commercially successful, as "even before a high-concept film is going to be released, its basic ideas are already present all over the world" (Jockel and Dobler, 2009 p.85). High concept films rely on recycling and adapting "previously successful narratives" (Wyatt, 1994 p.13) to ensure their commercial success. In the case of Spielberg's *Jaws,* Charles R. Acland writes that it is "truly a reiteration, and reinvigoration, of what had become dominant in the 1950's" (Acland, 2020 p. 226), in regards to its narrative and "spectacle and sensory thrills" (Acland, 2020 p.226). Acland's description of *Jaw*'s narrative alongside Wyatt's definition all but confirms that *Jaws,* in terms of narrative, does indeed fit the description of 'high-concept' cinema.

Alongside the term 'high concept', *Jaws* is also often described as a 'blockbuster', a term whose meaning Julian Stringer describes as "never fixed or clear" (Stringer, 2003 p. 2). Steve Neale traces the origins of the blockbuster film as far back as the "early 1950's" (Neale, 2003 p. 48), but specifies that a film being considered a 'blockbuster' is "marked not only by their scale and their cost, but also by the amount and type of publicity they receive and by the ways in which they are distributed and shown" (Neale, 2003 p. 48). In the late 70s, battling higher production costs and increasing demand, production companies began to search for a solution with economic promise. As Wyatt explains, "films which are packaged and composed of financially 'proven' components would seem to have a greater chance of attracting an audience" (Wyatt, 1994 p. 78). Blockbusters are often thought of as large-scale productions with a heavy emphasis on marketing and potential commercial success, thus existing parallel to Wyatt's definition of a 'high concept' film. Wyatt himself categorises the blockbuster as needing "a pre-sold property (such as a best-selling novel or play), within a traditional film genre" (Wyatt, 1994 p. 78).

Therefore, by Wyatt's definition, *Jaws* meets both of these requirements, and Wyatt goes on to classify *Jaws* as a 'blockbuster' film as well as a 'high concept' film.

At the time of its 1975 release, Spielberg's *Jaws,* a thriller film about a shark terrorising a community, capitalised on the recent success and popularity of Peter Benchley's 1974 novel of the same name, with Benchley co-writing the screenplay. Stephen E. Bowles writes that *Jaws "*successfully capitalised on the sensational publicity surrounding the best-selling novel..*"* (Bowles, 1976 p.196). Not only did *Jaws* build suspense and expectation by adapting a successful novel, it also employs the use of several narrative elements that have already been successful. Benchley is quoted by Bowles as saying the shark in *Jaws* is "more like one of those things they make movies about" (Benchley, cited in Bowles, 1976 p.197). Bowles specifies that *Jaws* depends on "traditions deeply rooted in the history of the cinema" (Bowles, 1976 p.197), and that *Jaws* uses an "established genre-formula to excite our imaginations" (Bowles, 1976 p.197). For example, Emilio Audissino writes that "*Jaws* was somehow in the 'disaster movies' category that was fashionable at the time" (Audissino, 2014 p.109).

However, the 'disaster movie' was not the only genre that *Jaws* capitalised on. Thomas Schatz explains that *Jaws* "tapped into the monster movie tradition, with a revenge-of-nature subtext" (Schatz, 2003 p.25). Presuming the shark in *Jaws* can be viewed in this context similarly to how a monster is viewed in a horror film, *Jaws* uses a physical character to induce anxiety or fear within an audience. This can be compared to creature or monster films that predate it, such as *Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, 1931) or *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1954). Bowles, in analysing and comparing *Jaws* and *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973),

shares similar sentiments, explaining “the basic man vs. demon/monster formula used by both films was a thematic staple of the horror-suspense cycle of the thirties” (Bowles, 1976 p. 198).

Additionally, Schatz goes on to write that “in the film's latter stages, the shark begins to take on supernatural, even Satanic qualities” (Schatz, 2003 p.25), further establishing *Jaws* in the ‘horror’ genre, as Bordwell, Thompson and Smith assert that the horror genre often features a “monster that is both fearsome and repellant” (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2020 p.335) . *Jaws* capitalises on these conventions, drawn from the success of films in the decades prior. Furthermore, as Terrence Rafferty summarises, “it's a monster, pure and simple, and its sole purpose is to generate fear” (Rafferty, 2000). Therefore, not just in narrative alone but also through characterisation reminiscent of a typical horror film, *Jaws* capitalises on successful tropes and elements seen in 1930’s and 1950’s cinema.

As well as utilising the shark, that would soon become iconic, as an identifiable and marketable antagonist, *Jaws* uses various other horror and thriller conventions and tropes to elicit emotion from the audience, notably building suspense through the film’s soundtrack. Sound can be integral to a film being considered ‘high concept’, as Wyatt specifies that, when considering film style’s relationship to high concept cinema, he includes within style “those elements within the film (such as stars and music) which are central to the film’s operation (and marketing)” (Wyatt, 1994 p. 23). As Bordwell, Thompson and Smith write, ‘the ominous, two-note motif played in the lower strings in *Jaws* (1975) becomes a musical signal of the shark’s movement towards his victims’ (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2020 p. 278). Through doing this, composer John

Williams, a frequent Spielberg collaborator, emulates an association between song and character, a 'theme', that has been seen in film countless times prior to *Jaws*.

Additionally, his suspenseful and emotive score echoes previously well-received horror and thriller scores. The infamous shark's 'theme', found in the soundtrack as *'Main Title And First Victim',* can be comparable to the iconic and extremely recognisable theme '*The Murder*', composed by Bernard Herrmann and famously utilised in Alfred Hitchcock's *'Psycho'* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). The two titles, while they differ in delivery and composition, are similar in tone and impact, thus asserting that *Jaws* replicates the success that Herrmann achieved through the *Psycho* score. Audissino draws a parallel between Williams' score and film scores in the 'classical period' by comparing their conception. Williams' score was reportedly inspired by the desire to "characterize something that's underwater with music rather than with sound effects" (Williams, cited in Audissino, 2014 p.110). Audissino writes that this is reminiscent of the thought process behind the score for another monster film, writing "the same thing had happened with the score for *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933)" (Audissino, 2014 p. 110). Alongside this, Schatz writes that "the radio and TV ads exploited John Williams' now-famous "Jaws theme"" (Schatz, 2003 p. 25), explaining that the score itself was utilised in the highly successful television marketing campaign for *Jaws.*

Therefore, by analysing the combination of both marketing and narrative that is integral for a film to be considered 'high-concept', it is reasonable to use this term in describing *Jaws.* Contrary to what is often the case in high-concept films, the appeal of *Jaws* was not star-power or a big-name director, but extremely effective advertising. This is perhaps an explanation for the

film's success (Daly, cited in Connor, 2015 p. 53). Douglas Gomery alleges that *Jaws* 'initiated the era of the Hollywood blockbuster' (Gomery, 2003 p. 72), through distributor Universal's use of television advertisements and merchandising, utilising Spielberg's carefully crafted imagery and Williams' aforementioned soundtrack. Universal employed a "saturation marketing campaign"(Connor, 2015 p. 53), a marketing strategy whose development Wyatt describes as "correlating with the development of high-concept" (Wyatt, 1994 p. 19). Gomery goes on to credit *Jaws* as being the film that inspired television advertising as the 'standard operating procedure in the American film industry' (Gomery, 2003, p. 74).

By approaching television as an advertising tool as opposed to a rival, Universal made millions. Films since have made much more money, but *Jaws* set the precedent, and it was not just the *type* of advertising that saw *Jaws* make well over its original budget, it was also the timing of its release, capitalising on the predicted larger audiences in the summer, because, as Rafferty notes, "why not release that type of movie in the summertime, when -- for the middle-class young, at least -- the livin' is easy?" (Rafferty, 2000). In fact, Universal's belief in the film's success was made evident when they extended the minimum screening time from nine to twelve weeks (Connor, 2015 p. 53), approaching the large advertising campaign with confidence.

In analysing, critiquing and exploring the marketing, production and reception of Spielberg's *Jaws,* an inextricable and undeniable link can be drawn between the marketing, recycled narrative and reliance of previously successful elements with its long-lasting and huge success. The combination of, as Wyatt puts it, a "pre-sold property" (Wyatt, 1994 p. 78), "saturation advertising" (Connor, 2015 p. 53) and repetition of narrative elements that have seen success

before firmly cements *Jaws* within the category of ‘high concept’ cinema. Therefore, Wyatt’s writing regarding ‘high-concept’ cinema can be applied to contextualise and explain the enormous success of Spielberg’s *Jaws.*

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