

## Howl-oween Series – Part I: Jaws and the Meaning of Horror

by Glen Ryan Tadych

Filmsite.org defines a horror film as “an unsettling film designed to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time in a cathartic experience.”

In looking at this definition, I find our perception of horror has shifted to a narrower view these days. Generally speaking, we expect a horror film



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to involve a supernatural element, zombies or a knife-wielding killer; the result of three bloated decades of tasteless horror films, sequels and remakes.

In light of these trends and the film’s 40th anniversary, I dedicate the first part of this October series to one of the greatest, but often dismissed horror films of all time: *Jaws*.

Set in the beach resort community of Amity Island, a great white shark puts a damper on summer festivities when a young girl’s remains wash ashore. Fearing for the safety of the island’s citizens, Police Chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider) fights the town’s mayor (Murray Hamilton) to close the beaches. The mayor’s stubbornness prevails, resulting in several more deaths, one on the Fourth of July.

Teamed with marine biologist Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss) and shark hunter Quint (Robert Shaw), the three venture out to sea to take on the predator and put an end to the summer terror, but little do they know this shark will give them more than they bargained for.

Behind *Psycho* (1960), the [American Film Institute](#) lists *Jaws* as the second-most thrilling film in one hundred years of American cinema.

Prior to 1975, the horror genre gave us classics such as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Wolf Man* (1941), *The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Psycho*, *The Birds* (1963), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). These films, in their time, set the standard for what scares us on the big screen.

*Psycho* brought anxiety to anyone who stepped in the shower, making what was once a relaxing place to refresh one’s self a claustrophobic nightmare begging the question, “Who’s there?”

*Jaws* took this a step further by placing that same fear in the world’s oceans. However, today *Jaws* seems to sit aside from horror films rather than among them. And while I’m sure some, along with myself, don’t hesitate to place *Jaws* into the horror category, there are certainly others who refuse on account of “it’s only a thriller,” action-adventure film or summer blockbuster.

Action-adventure in regard to *Jaws* makes sense, of course, because it is Steven Spielberg after all, the man who gave us *Indiana Jones*. But we must remember Spielberg wasn’t a household name prior to 1975. Up until then, he was known for his work in television, *Amblin’* (1968), *Duel* (1971) and *The Sugarland Express* (1974). We know him today for his family-oriented films, adventures and historical dramas; not the case in the early ‘70s.

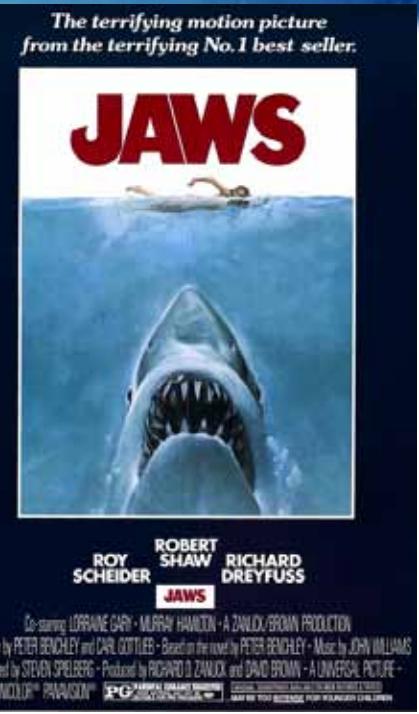
Some might argue that because of *Jaws*’ summer setting, the film feels more like a “summer movie,”

and not a horror film one would watch in October. I’m not going to dispute this because I’m definitely fond of watching *Jaws* in the summer, particularly on the Fourth of July. However, this doesn’t mean the film can’t fall into the category of horror.

We moviegoers like to make these rationalizations, often losing sight of what a film really is at times. The genre to which a film belongs doesn’t change just because one feels like watching it at one time of the year as opposed to another. And it’s not impossible for a film, like *Jaws*, to fit within multiple genres, but when a film produces numerous screams from its audience, gives viewers nightmares and instills a mortal fear of the water among an entire generation, it’d be stupid to label the film as anything but horror. An example of the film’s effect on audiences in 1975 is given in the documentary *Spotlight On Location: The Making of Jaws* (2000), when producer David Brown recalls his first screening of *Jaws* with an audience, noting that “the screams started, and they never stopped.”

Other elements which may deter some viewers are parts of John Williams’ score. The score is polarized in tone, giving the listener moments of both fright and joy throughout the film, but then again that’s the point. Such contrast is perfect for a horror film, which is what can make so edgy for the viewer. Most of *Jaws* also takes place in daylight, causing that fear of the dark, a commonality in horror films, to be less prominent. But some things can be just as scary in the light as in the dark, as *Jaws* perfectly demonstrates.

These elements, and others like them, distract viewers from *Jaws*’ true identity when they shouldn’t; especially to those born after the film’s release. No one would argue *Jaws*’ status as a



thriller, but one might ask as to what specifically makes it horror?

For one, it’s important to examine what horror means to audiences today, as opposed to 40 years ago. The perception of horror in film has changed drastically since the ‘70s, mainly due to the success of John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978). And while *Halloween* wasn’t the first slasher film ever made, it popularized the genre, spawning an abundance of sequels, remakes and films with similar themes and elements. Even slasher films released prior to *Halloween* gained more recognition due to its popularity and success, so it’s not surprising the horror genre has become more synonymous with slashers today, taking attention away from non-slasher horror films like *Jaws*.

Most horror films today also either revolve heavily around gore, jump scares or paranormal elements, and while *Jaws* does feature jump scares and gore, the extreme emphasis on these elements in contemporary horror diminishes the effect of these elements by 1975 standards.

Now, even with cultural perception shifts in play, one might still argue that *Jaws* is only a thriller. But what really is the difference between horror and thriller? One might say a thriller applies suspense, excitement and tension to a film’s story, while horror plays on the audience’s fears. Well, *Jaws* executes both in an exceptional fashion by playing on one’s fear of the water while implementing suspense, excitement and tension to heighten the impact of that fear.

The fact is, and most of my generation may not understand this, *Jaws* scared the life out of people in 1975, and probably more than any horror film

## FRESH FILMS THIS WEEK &...



### THE MARTIAN

#### The Martian

PG-13 141 min Action | Adventure | Sci-Fi

During a manned mission to Mars, Astronaut Mark Watney is presumed dead after a fierce storm and left behind by his crew. But Watney has survived and finds himself stranded and alone on the hostile planet. With only meager supplies, he must draw upon his ingenuity, wit and spirit to subsist and find a way to signal to Earth that he is alive.

Director: Ridley Scott

Stars: Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Kristen Wiig, Kate Mara

before it considering its cultural impact. When a film terrifies a country into avoiding the beach during the summer, it's fair to say a powerful impression has been made. Film critic Jeffrey Lyons said in a [2010 CNN interview](#) that he hasn't been in the ocean since he saw the film. Lyons' comment brings the scene between Brody and his wife (Lorraine Gary) regarding their son following the death of a young boy to mind.

"I don't think he'll ever go in the water again after what happened yesterday!" Mrs. Brody exclaims.

*Jaws* is also responsible for our fear of sharks. In a [2005 National Geographic interview](#), shark biologist George Burgess said, "(*Jaws*) perpetuated the myths about sharks as man-eaters and bloodthirsty killers...even though the odds of an individual entering the sea and being attacked by a shark are almost infinitesimal."

Shark sightings and hunting increased following the film's release, further instilling the prejudice toward these animals; a prejudice which remains today. The fear is simply in our blood, and it's all because of this film and its many elements.

#### The Poster [refer to header photo]

What isn't horrifying about the image of a monstrous beast swimming up to swallow an unknowing swimmer? Just imagine yourself swimming peacefully in the ocean as this leviathan slowly approaches from below. Still calm?

#### The Theme [video link]

What does anyone think when they hear the notorious Dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun...? Something lurking. A slow-approaching predator. Terror. This musical theme is so well-known, even those who haven't seen *Jaws* know its significance.

#### First Victim [video link]

If one only hears the horrifying screams of Chrissie Watkins, I'm pretty sure *E.T.* and *Indiana Jones* don't come to mind.

#### Ben Gardner [video link]

This scene, one of the most startling in the film,

RED TEXT, WHEN CLICKED  
OR TOUCHED, OPENS UP  
INTERACTIVE CONTENT

## ...NEXT WEEK



### PAN

#### Pan

PG 111 min Adventure | Family | Fantasy

12-year-old orphan Peter is spirited away to the magical world of Neverland, where he finds both fun and dangers, and ultimately discovers his destiny -- to become the hero who will be forever known as Peter Pan.

Director: Joe Wright

Stars: Levi Miller, Hugh Jackman, Garrett Hedlund, Rooney Mara

## NEW FILMS: OCTOBER 2, 2015

#### Freeheld

PG-13 103 min Drama | Romance

New Jersey police lieutenant, Laurel Hester, and her registered domestic partner, Stacie Andree, both battle to secure Hester's pension benefits when she is diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Director: Peter Sollett

Stars: Julianne Moore, Ellen Page, Steve Carell, Michael Shannon

#### He Named Me Malala [Limited]

PG-13 87 min Documentary

A look at the events leading up to the Talibans' attack on the young Pakistani school girl, Malala Yousafzai, for speaking out on girls' education and the aftermath, including her speech to the United Nations.

Director: Davis Guggenheim

Stars: Malala Yousafzai, Ziauddin Yousafzai, Toor Pekai Yousafzai, Khushal Yousafzai

#### Shanghai [Limited]

R 105 min Drama | Mystery | Romance

A '40s period piece which revolves around an American expat who returns to Shanghai in the months before Pearl Harbor due to the death of his friend.

Director: Mikael Häfström

Stars: John Cusack, Li Gong, Yun-Fat Chow, David Morse

#### Partisan [Limited]

98 min Drama | Thriller

Alexander, a boy who has been raised in a sequestered commune, finds that his increasing unwillingness to fall in line puts him on a collision course with Gregori, the society's charismatic and domineering leader.

Director: Ariel Kleiman

Stars: Vincent Cassel, Jeremy Chabriel, Florence Mezzara, Nigel Barber

#### Addicted to Fresno

85 min -Comedy

Follows the lives two co-dependent sisters who work as hotel maids in Fresno.

Director: Jamie Babbit

Stars: Judy Greer, Natasha Lyonne, Malcolm Barrett, Jessica St. Clair

## NEW FILMS: OCTOBER 9, 2015

#### The Walk

PG 123 min Adventure | Biography | Drama | Thriller

In 1974, high-wire artist Philippe Petit recruits a team of people to help him realize his dream: to walk the the immense void between the World Trade Center towers.

Director: Robert Zemeckis

Stars: Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Charlotte Le Bon, Guillaume Baillargeon, Émilie Leclerc

#### Big Stone Gap

PG-13 103 min Comedy | Romance

In a small town nestled in the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia, self-proclaimed spinster Ave Maria Mulligan finds her life shaken up and forever changed after learning a long-buried family secret.

Director: Adriana Trigiani

Stars: Ashley Judd, Patrick Wilson, Whoopi Goldberg, John Benjamin Hickey

#### Steve Jobs

R 122 min Biography | Drama

Set backstage at three iconic product launches and ending in 1998 with the unveiling of the iMac, Steve Jobs takes us behind the scenes of the digital revolution to paint a portrait of the man at its epicenter.

Director: Danny Boyle

Stars: Michael Fassbender, Kate Winslet, Seth Rogen, Jeff Daniels

#### The Final Girls

PG-13 88 min Comedy | Horror

A young woman grieving the loss of her mother, a famous scream queen from the 1980s, finds herself pulled into the world of her mom's most famous movie. Reunited, the women must fight off the film's maniacal killer.

Director: Todd Strauss-Schulson

Stars: Taissa Farmiga, Malin Akerman, Adam DeVine, Thomas Middleditch

#### Victoria

138 min Crime | Drama | Thriller

While on holiday in Berlin, a young woman finds her flirtation with a local guy turn potentially deadly as their night out with his friends reveals its secret: the four men owe someone a dangerous favor that requires repaying that evening.

Director: Sebastian Schipper

Stars: Laia Costa, Frederick Lau, Franz gowski, Burak Yigit