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The New Hollywood

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Jaws and the New Hollywood

If any single film marked the arrival of the New Hollywood, it was *Jaws*, the Spielberg-directed thriller that recalibrated the profit potential of the Hollywood hit, and redefined its status as a marketable commodity and cultural phenomenon as well. The film brought an emphatic end to Hollywood's five-year recession, while ushering in an era of high-cost, high-tech, high-speed thrillers. *Jaws'* release also happened to coincide with developments both inside and outside the movie industry in the mid-1970s which, while having little or nothing to do with that particular film, were equally important to the emergent New Hollywood.

Jaws, like *Love Story*, *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist*, and several other recent hits, was presold via a current best-selling novel. And like *The Godfather*, movie rights to the novel were purchased before it was published, and publicity from the deal and from the subsequent production helped spur the initial book sales—of a reported 7.6 million copies before the film's release in this case—which in turn fueled public interest in the film.¹⁹ The *Jaws* deal was packaged by International Creative Management (ICM), which represented author Peter Benchley and handled the sale of the movie rights. ICM also represented the producing team of Richard Zanuck and David Brown, whose recent hits included *Butch Cassidy* and *The Sting*, and who worked with ICM to put together the movie project with MCA/Universal and *wunderkind* director Steven Spielberg.²⁰

Initially budgeted at \$3.5 million, *Jaws* was expensive by contemporary standards (average production costs in 1975 were \$2.5 million), but it was scarcely a big-ticket project in that age of \$10 million musicals and \$20 million disaster epics.²¹ The budget did steadily escalate due to logistical problems and Spielberg's ever-expanding vision and confidence; in fact problems with the mechanical shark pushed the effects budget alone to over \$3 million. The producers managed to parlay those problems into positive publicity, however, and continued to hype the film during post-production. The movie was planned for a Summer 1975 release due to its subject matter, even though in those years most calculated hits were released during the Christmas holidays. Zanuck and Brown compensated by spending \$2.5 million on promotion, much of it invested in a media blitz during the week before the film's 464-screen opening.²²

The print campaign featured a poster depicting a huge shark rising through the water toward an unsuspecting swimmer, while the radio and TV ads exploited John Williams's now-famous "Jaws theme." The provocative poster art and Williams's pulsating, foreboding theme conveyed the essence of the film experience and worked their way into the national consciousness, setting new standards for motion picture promotion. With the public's appetite sufficiently whetted, *Jaws'* release set off a feeding frenzy as 25 million tickets were sold in the film's first 38 days of release. After this quick start, the shark proved to have "good legs" at the box office, running strong throughout the summer en route to a record \$102.5 million in rentals in 1975. In the process, *Jaws* became a veritable sub-industry unto itself via commercial tie-ins and merchandising ploys. But hype and promotion aside, *Jaws'* success ultimately centered on the appeal of the film itself; one enduring verity in the movie business is that, whatever the marketing efforts, only positive audience response and favorable word-of-mouth can propel a film to genuine hit status.

Jaws was essentially an action film and a thriller, of course, though it effectively melded various genres and story types. It tapped into the monster movie tradition with a revenge-of-nature subtext (like *King Kong*, *The Birds*, et al.), and in the film's latter stages the shark begins to take on supernatural, even Satanic, qualities à la *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist*. And given the fact that the initial victims are women and children, *Jaws* also had ties to the high-gore "slasher" film, which had been given considerable impetus a year earlier by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The seagoing chase in the latter half is also a buddy film and a male initiation story, with Brodie the cop, Hooper the scientist, and Quint the sea captain providing different strategies for dealing with the shark and different takes on male heroic behavior.

Technically, *Jaws* is an adept "chase film" that takes the viewer on an emotional roller coaster, first in awaiting the subsequent (and increasingly

graphic) shark attacks, then in the actual pursuit of the shark. The narrative is precise and effectively paced, with each stage building to a climactic peak, then dissipating, then building again until the explosive finale. The performances, camera work, and editing are all crucial to this effect, as is John Williams's score. This was in fact the breakthrough film for Williams, the first in a run of huge hits that he scored (including *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *E.T.*) whose music is absolutely essential to the emotional impact of the film.

Many critics disparaged that impact, dismissing *Jaws* as an utterly mechanical (if technically flawless) exercise in viewer manipulation. James Monaco cites *Jaws* itself as the basis for the "Bruce aesthetic" (named after the film crew's pet name for the marauding robotic shark), whose ultimate cinematic effect is "visceral—mechanical rather than human." More exciting than interesting, more style than substance, *Jaws* and its myriad offspring, argues Monaco, are mere "machines of entertainment, precisely calculated to achieve their effect."²³ Others have argued, however, that *Jaws* is redeemed by several factors, notably the political critique in the film's first half, the essential humanity of Brodie, and the growing camaraderie of the three pursuers.

Critical debate aside, *Jaws* was a social, industrial, and economic phenomenon of the first order, a cinematic idea and cultural commodity whose time had come. In many ways, the film simply confirmed or consolidated various existing industry trends and practices. In terms of marketing, *Jaws*' nationwide release and concurrent ad campaign underscored the value of saturation booking and advertising, which placed increased importance on a film's box-office performance in its opening weeks of release. "Front-loading" the audience became a widespread marketing ploy, since it maximized a movie's event status while diminishing the potential damage done to weak pictures by negative reviews and poor word of mouth. *Jaws* also confirmed the viability of the "summer hit," indicating an adjustment in seasonal release tactics and a few other new moviegoing trends as well. One involved the composition and industry conceptualization of the youth market, which was shifting from the politically hip, cineliterate viewers of a few years earlier to even younger viewers with more conservative tastes and sensibilities. Demographically, this trend reflected the aging of the front-end baby boomers and the ascendance not only of their younger siblings but of their children as well—a new generation with time and spending money and a penchant for wandering suburban shopping malls and for repeated viewings of their favorite films.

This signaled a crucial shift in moviegoing and exhibition that accompanied the rise of the modern "shopping center." Until the mid-1970s,

despite suburbanization and the rise of the drive-in, movie exhibition still was dominated by a select group of so-called "key run" bookings in major markets. According to Axel Madsen's 1975 study of the industry, over 60 percent of box-office revenues were generated by 1,000 key-run indoor theaters—out of a total of roughly 11,500 indoor and 3,500 outdoor theaters in the U.S.²⁴ Though Madsen scarcely saw it at the time, this was about to change dramatically. Between 1965 and 1970, the number of shopping malls in the U.S. increased from about 1,500 to 12,500; by 1980 the number would reach 22,500.²⁵ The number of indoor theaters, which had held remarkably steady from 1965 to 1974 at just over 10,000, began to increase sharply in 1975 and reached a total of 22,750 by 1990, due largely to the surge of mall-based "multi-plex" theaters.²⁶

With the shifting market patterns and changing conception of youth culture, the mid-1970s also saw the rapid decline of the art cinema movement as a significant industry force. A number of films in 1974–1975 marked both the peak and, as it turned out, the waning of the Hollywood renaissance—Altman's *Nashville*, Penn's *Night Moves*, Polanski's *Chinatown*, and most notably perhaps, Coppola's *The Conversation*. The consummate American auteur and "godfather" to a generation of filmmakers, Coppola's own artistic bent and maverick filmmaking left him oddly out of step with the times. While Coppola was in the Philippines filming *Apocalypse Now*, a brilliant though self-indulgent, self-destructive venture of Wellesian proportions, his protégés Lucas and Spielberg were busy refining the New Hollywood's Bruce aesthetic (via *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*), while replacing the director-as-author with a director-as-superstar ethos.

The emergence of star directors like Lucas and Spielberg evinced not only the growing salaries and leverage of top talent, but also the increasing influence of Hollywood's top agents and talent agencies. The kind of packaging done by ICM on *Jaws* was fast becoming the rule on high-stakes projects, with ICM and another powerful agency, Creative Artists Associates (CAA), relying on aggressive packaging to compete with the venerable William Morris Agency. Interestingly enough, both ICM and CAA were created in 1974—ICM via merger and CAA by five young agents who bolted William Morris and, led by Michael Ovitz, set out to revamp the industry and upgrade the power and status of the agent-packager. For the most part they succeeded, and consequently top agents, most often from CAA or ICM, became even more important than studio executives in putting together movie projects. And not surprisingly, given this shift in the power structure, an increasing number of top studio executives after the mid-1970s came from the agency ranks.

Yet another significant mid-1970s industry trend was the elimination of tax loopholes and write-offs which had provided incentives for investors,

1. In what way was <i>Jaws</i> presold?	5. In terms of marketing, <i>Jaws</i> ' release underscored what two tactics?
2. Before <i>Jaws</i> , most big movies were released during what season?	6. What is "front-loading" and why did it become important for blockbusters?
3. What was effective about the advertising campaign for <i>Jaws</i> ?	7. How was youth market for movies changing?
4. What genre's did <i>Jaws</i> combine?	8. What impact did the rise of shopping malls have on the number of indoor theaters?