

Not the first: myths of jaws

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Not the First: Myths of *Jaws*

Sheldon Hall

Looking up references to *Jaws* in a couple of dozen standard sources produces a remarkable degree of consensus: certain themes recur ceaselessly. These themes, which are found in scholarly studies as well as in popular journalistic and fan-based accounts of the film, are so insistent that they form a coherent, consistent mythology – a mythology in the sense of both a plausible narrative or ‘biographical legend’ (assuming a film can be said to have a biography) and a set of beliefs that have become taken for granted as a way of discussing the film and understanding its significance. In particular they revolve around a set of supposed ‘firsts’ that are the subject of this chapter.

The notion that *Jaws* was a watershed marking the end of one era (the ‘New Hollywood’ of auteurs and quasi-art films financed and released by major studios) and the beginning of another (the New ‘New Hollywood’ of big-budget action pictures and technological spectacle), recurs throughout both the critical literature and the popular discourse:

‘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.’¹

‘If there was a single day when the era ended, it was June 21, 1975, just after two landmark films had appeared on the respective covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Newsweek's cover film was *Nashville*, thought by some to be the film of the decade, but it was not the one that changed Hollywood forever. *Jaws* was.'²

'The film created a sensation and with it Universal initiated the era of the blockbuster feature film, and forever altered the Hollywood film landscape.'³

'*Jaws* was the first big-budget Hollywood film to be given both saturation television advertising and to be released from the start in a large number of cinemas.'⁴

'*Jaws* (1975) was the first proto-blockbuster to deploy exploitation pre-release marketing tactics and saturation booking.'⁵

'The reputation of *Jaws* as the seminal blockbuster, as we know that term today, is beyond dispute. This was the start of the event movie; this was where the marketing of films blurred into military strategy.'⁶

'At mid-decade, Steven Spielberg's much-delayed production *Jaws* redefined the meaning of a blockbuster in the modern era. It was the first studio-planned national wide release, with a TV saturation ad campaign, licensing, and merchandising. It was also the first summer blockbuster, setting a precedent for all other summer blockbusters to follow.'⁷

'*Jaws* was the first in a new genre, the summer blockbuster movie. [...] It marked a turning point in the business.'⁸

‘For many, the release of *Jaws* in 1975 constitutes the true birth of New Hollywood. A huge film in so many ways, not least its box office receipts, *Jaws* has been credited with inventing the concept of the summer blockbuster, the must-see “event” movie cut to the measure of the big screen, a sure-fire draw that would take families away from their TV sets.’⁹

‘In 1975, Steven Spielberg’s thriller *Jaws* ushered in a new era of filmmaking when it transformed the usually low-earning period of the summer break into a prime time for profit making.’¹⁰

‘It was the first film to break the \$100 million mark in box office takings and, for two years (up until the release of *Star Wars* in 1977), it remained the most successful box office hit in movie history. It also ushered in the age of the contemporary summer blockbuster.’¹¹

‘*Jaws* changed the business forever...’¹²

‘*Jaws* proved to be a genuine industry watershed, marking the birth of the New Hollywood in several crucial ways. [...] *Jaws* sparked a widespread industry recovery that was fuelled primarily by a new breed of blockbuster.’¹³

Synthesising the above-quoted accounts (which could no doubt be added to exponentially), five main themes, or myths, emerge as standard. *Jaws* is said to be the:

1. First film to gross \$100 million at the U.S. box office

2. First blockbuster movie
3. First summer blockbuster
4. First big-budget major-studio film to be TV-advertised
5. First big-budget major-studio film to open wide

Each of these claims contains a grain of truth otherwise they would not have gained such strong purchase as they have. But they should not be accepted at face value. My own position echoes another comment by Thomas Schatz (author of the first and last of the above quotations), when at one point in his seminal 1993 article on ‘The New Hollywood’ he noted in passing of *Jaws*: ‘In many ways, the film simply confirmed or consolidated various existing industry trends and practices.’¹⁴ This seems to me to get at the truth of the matter. Contrary to the mythology, *Jaws* did not appear out of nowhere to start a new and unprecedented cinematic ethos; rather, it emerged directly or indirectly out of industry practices with a long prior history which it refined, reworked or – to use a common current term – rebooted. I want therefore to develop and expand upon Schatz’s insight by taking each of the above five myths in turn and attempting to demonstrate how they are all at best exaggerations, at worst distortions, of longer developments in commercial distribution, exhibition and promotion of which *Jaws* was as much a culmination as a breakthrough.

1. First film to gross \$100 million at the U.S. box office

The figure of \$100 million has a talismanic significance in accounts of *Jaws*. It is offered as tangible, self-explanatory proof of the film’s importance, condensed into an easily-comprehended figure. Thus a multi-authored volume claims that ‘*Jaws* became the first film in motion picture history to earn over \$100 million’ and Warren Buckland states that it was

‘the first film to break the \$100 million mark in box office takings’.¹⁵ Douglas Gomery tells us more specifically that it ‘earned more than \$100 million at the box office in six months’, while Justin Wyatt notes that subsequently ‘\$100 million became a benchmark for the blockbuster.’¹⁶ But \$100 million in what, exactly? What does this magical figure actually betoken?

In fact, *Jaws* was not the first film to gross \$100 million *at the box office*. Rather, it was the first to earn \$100 million in *distributor rentals* from the domestic, i.e. North American (U.S. and Canadian), market. *Grosses* are the monies taken at theatre box offices before any deductions by exhibitors or ‘off-the-top’ disbursements to revenue participants (such as stars with a cut of the gross from ‘the first dollar’). *Rentals* are the proportion of box-office takings – a proportion which may vary from one film to another, from one cinema to another or indeed from one week of a film’s release to another – that are passed on to the distributor. These are the revenues available to pay off the film’s production, distribution and marketing costs, as well as the distributor’s fees, interest on the production loan and numerous other charges and expenses. Before the collection of national data directly from cinemas, there was not always a reliable way of knowing a film’s total theatre earnings. In the late stages of a film’s release (when bookings would be made for the payment of flat fees rather than a percentage of takings, as was common in early runs) theatres might not bother to report their takings to distributors, so there might be no accurate record of total ticket sales.

Until the late 1990s therefore, unless particular theatres were under discussion it was standard practice for trade journals such as *Variety* to refer to rentals rather than grosses because they provided a clearer index of a film’s potential profitability. But because modern sources tend to cite grosses rather than rentals (a concept that is less easily understood than combined ticket sales), figures from the past which refer to rentals are often mistaken as grosses and vice versa. *Variety*’s A.D. Murphy noted in an article specifically related to *Jaws*:

‘It is a common error in and out of the trade to confuse b.o. [grosses] with rentals. Boxoffice figures are meaningful in the early stages of release of a film in order to gauge its initial impact in given situations at a given time. But over time, rentals become the most meaningful parameter’.¹⁷

Web sites such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and Wikipedia are especially prone to this confusion, mixing up the different types of data or failing to identify which is which, and sometimes multiplying rental figures to estimate grosses without being explicit about doing so. In one of his later pieces, ‘Tom’ (*sic*) Schatz is again clearer than most commentators in noting that *Jaws* was ‘the first film to gross over \$200 million at the box office and to return over \$100 million in rental receipts to its distributor – still the measure of a blockbuster hit’.¹⁸

As Michael Coate has observed, several films before *Jaws* had earned a domestic box-office *gross* of \$100 million in the U.S. and Canada, beginning with *The Sound of Music* (1965) and followed by *Gone with the Wind* (first released in 1939, but surpassing \$100 million thanks to its 1967 reissue), *The Godfather* (1972), *The Sting* (1973) and *The Exorcist* (1973).¹⁹ *The Sound of Music* was also the first film to earn over \$100 million in world rentals. These five were the benchmark predecessors that *Jaws* had to beat in order to achieve its record revenues (however they were calibrated). Universal made a point of this by taking out a front-page advertisement in *Variety* each time one of them was surpassed until *Jaws* took the top spot from *The Godfather* on 5 September 1975. The advertisement noting this milestone also listed the domestic rentals of the earlier films as reported by *Variety* at the start of the year (but not of *Jaws* itself): *The Exorcist*, \$66,300,000; *The Sting*, \$68,450,000; *Gone with the Wind*, \$70,179,000; *The Sound of Music*, \$83,891,000; *The Godfather*, \$85,747,184.²⁰

Variety reported in its news columns that *Jaws* had passed the \$100 million gross milestone on 23 August 1975, the film's fifty-ninth day of release, when Universal claimed the domestic theatre gross stood at \$100,375,045.²¹ But the studio declined to disclose rental figures at this stage. Murphy predicted in December 1975 that *Jaws* would be the first film to reach \$200 million in *worldwide* rentals, but it was not until *Variety*'s year-end report in January 1976 that *Variety* estimated a *domestic* rental over \$100,000,000: the initial figure published was \$102,650,000, which two weeks later was amended to \$104,000,000.²² At this point the journal also reported that *Jaws* had surpassed *The Godfather* to achieve the highest worldwide rental to date, with a global total of \$132,000,000 by January 1976 (overseas release having started in October 1975, but with most territories including the UK opening in December).²³ Updates of the film's total domestic rentals regularly appeared in the paper's annual charts of 'All-Time Film Rental Champs', reflecting additional revenues from reissues, and in January 1985 *Variety* issued its most precise U.S./Canadian rental figure yet: \$129,961,081.²⁴ This was doubtless based on information received directly from the distributor, as other Universal titles were similarly updated with exact figures. They included Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), the first film to earn a domestic rental over \$200 million, with a reported total at this stage of \$209,976,989.

2. First blockbuster movie

Douglas Gomery has been especially insistent that *Jaws* was 'the first true blockbuster' and that with its release MCA-Universal and its chairman Lew Wasserman had 'initiated the era of the Hollywood blockbuster'.²⁵ But if that was the case, one wonders what people had been talking about when referring to blockbusters over the previous three decades. In fact, by 1975, 'blockbuster' was an old and familiar term, used outside of trade circles and even by

the general public.²⁶ *Jaws* may have modified understanding of the concept, but it certainly did not create the category of blockbuster.

The word itself was first used in 1943, both extra-cinematically (it originated as the nickname given to a large bomb capable of destroying a city block, first deployed militarily in that year) and in its colloquial application to movies. Initially ‘blockbuster’ was used as a thematically appropriate metaphor to describe war-related films, beginning most appositely with RKO’s *Bombardier* (1943). But after World War II, from about 1948 onward, it was used analogically to denote films of considerable (commercial) power, size and impact. It therefore became added to a lexicon of terms which historically have been used to refer to films of particular industrial importance because of their exceptional cost, the exceptional marketing strategies used to promote them or their exceptional box-office success. Earlier such terms have included feature, special, superspecial and roadshow, among others, most of which have fallen into disuse except by film historians.²⁷

Moreover, in the 1950s ‘blockbuster’ came to refer not just to a particular kind of film but to a whole industrial strategy associated with the *regular* production of big-budget, heavily-promoted films, distinct from more routine offerings and differentiated from other cultural and entertainment forms such as television (though the word blockbuster was sometimes used to describe these other forms too).²⁸ This strategy came to define the postwar, ‘post-classical’ or ‘post-studio’ era, reflecting changes in leisure patterns and in film consumption, as well as new or enhanced distribution and exhibition modes, such as the increased number of films presented as special ‘roadshow’ attractions in the late 1950s and 1960s. Traditional genres like the western, war film and musical were upgraded with higher budgets and technological enhancements such as colour and widescreen formats, while at the same time more marginal, mostly low-budget genres such as horror and science fiction experienced a resurgence with an increased number of productions, often made independently

and sometimes deemed ‘exploitation’ pictures for the way in which heavy promotion aimed to turn them into mainstream successes. The taken-for-grantedness of blockbusters as both a production category and an industrial strategy can be seen in the pervasive presence of the word in magazine articles and trade-paper reports throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with titles such as ‘1958: Year of blockbusters’, ‘The Theory and Practice of Blockbusting’ and ‘Blockbusters or bust?’.²⁹

Thus, when *Jaws* made its appearance in mid-1975 there was a ready-made conceptual category in which to place it rather than its inventing a new one. Indeed, there were several such categories available: another was ‘disaster film’, the most recent generic variant of the blockbuster, in which all-star casts were consumed by conflagrations or caught up in mid-air collisions, natural cataclysms and all manner of collective crises. *Jaws*, with its scenario of a community beset by an oceanic threat on its doorstep, leading to scenes of mass panic on a beach, fitted this established template also. Although there were significant recent predecessors such as *Krakatoa, East of Java* (1969), *Airport* (1970) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), the disaster film really established itself as a recognised industry trend in the autumn of 1974, which saw the release in close succession of *Airport 1975* (1974), *Earthquake* (1974) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974), all spectacular successes. *Earthquake* and the *Airport* films were produced and released by MCA-Universal, which must clearly have known blockbusters when it saw them (as it had also done the previous year with *The Sting*). Some critics placed *Jaws* squarely within this disaster cycle; writing in the UK, six months after its U.S. opening, Gordon Gow noted that the film was ‘on a par in masochistic magnetism with *The Towering Inferno*’, and Tom Milne commented: ‘While it hardly merits the status of No. 1 box-office *Jaws* is a perfectly acceptable, and sometimes genuinely exciting, entry in the disaster stakes.’³⁰ James Monaco’s *Sight and Sound* review focused on the film’s commercial achievement, identifying it with an already-established pattern:

Hollywood, he noted, was ‘becoming increasingly oriented towards the large-budget, pre-sold adventure movie’.³¹ In other words, *Jaws* was continuing a trend, rather than creating one.

3. First summer blockbuster

The argument in favour of *Jaws* being the ‘first’ summer blockbuster is likely a response to the setting and subject matter of the film itself as much as to its seasonal timing. The story of course takes place at a coastal holiday resort during a summer vacation, with the key beach set-piece occurring over the July Independence Day weekend. This synergy was surely not lost on Universal, whose decision to open the film on 20 June and to design a release pattern which kept it in circulation throughout July and August was certainly a triumph of scheduling and marketing. But as we shall see later, the success of that strategy depended partly on *limiting* the film’s release – again, contrary to the mythology.

The summer months (especially July and August) were traditionally regarded as a lean time by distributors and exhibitors. Throughout the ‘classical’ studio era, the distributors designated their business year by seasons rather than by calendar year, and for most companies the annual season began in September and ended in August (Twentieth Century-Fox was an exception, organising its business year from August to July). Thus the optimum time to launch the new season’s lineup was in the fall (television’s annual seasons are comparable in this regard). Exhibitors, however, often complained that they were denied a steady stream of top pictures throughout the year and were sometimes left with a product shortage in the summer months, when they were forced to play out the end-of-season period with ‘extended runs, repeat engagements or reissues’ unless the distributors decided to open some of their new season’s product early.³² Even the industry’s all-time peak year for

attendance, 1946, was affected by a summer slump, though in its case this was ‘merely a drop in biz from super-sensational to mildly terrific’.³³

Summer was also, of course, the holiday period, when leisure-seekers enjoyed outdoor activity in preference to movies. The first Monday in September is a national holiday, Labor Day, and this is often seen as marking the end of the summer vacation period. But hot weather also meant problems for many theatres, particularly those in southern and mid-western states, which often closed in summer not only to allow their own staff a vacation but also because sweltering heat made some indoor theatres inhospitable. Even Broadway first-run houses could struggle in a heat wave.

Some of these conditions changed over time, however. The spread of air conditioning was credited by *Variety* in 1936 for a major upturn in summer business, with ‘air-cooled theatres’ offering a positive alternative to outdoor heat (‘Instead of a bugaboo, hot weather has become an asset.’).³⁴ That summer saw the release of one of the decade’s biggest hits, MGM’s *San Francisco* (1936), which opened in July and played its metropolitan first runs through August. Its total domestic rental of \$2,868,000 was surpassed among 1930s releases to that point only by the same studio’s *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936). The following summer MGM enjoyed almost as great a success with another Clark Gable vehicle, *Saratoga* (1937).³⁵

These films also reflected the industry’s, and the country’s, emergence from the Depression, though they were followed by a further recession. During the wartime boom years, exceptional conditions led to an alleviation of expected patterns of a summer drop-off, which *Variety* attributed to ‘distributors’ willingness to release top product immediately instead of waiting for the start of the new season; high wages in war-related industries, benefiting nearby communities; [and] shortage of gasoline keeping holiday-makers at home’.³⁶ The 1946 ‘seasonal dip’ prior to a record fall could also be explained by local

factors, including ‘the great urge to get away from it all, denied for four years of gas rationing and travel restrictions’.³⁷

The related postwar rises of car ownership and the drive-in theatre help account for the increased importance of the summer season in the 1950s and 1960s. Open-air theatres after sundown attracted family groups as well as out-of-school teenagers on dates. While most roadshows were launched in the spring or fall seasons, films aimed at the family market (for example, Walt Disney’s) were often released in the summer and other holiday periods, when they found a ready audience of pre-teens and parents. Big-budget films which went into wide release in summer months included United Artists’ *Trapeze* (1956), which earned the ‘largest single week’s gross in the history of the motion picture business’ when generally released in 405 theatres in July 1956 following pre-release runs the previous month; and UA’s *The Vikings* (1958), which after opening at Easter went wide during the summer, with ‘1,000 bookings aimed for during three weeks, mainly to break around [the] July 4 holiday’.³⁸ These two films were released with domestic inventories of 600 and 700 prints, respectively. Summer was also often the period when many roadshow films went into general release – that is, when they became more widely available to regular exhibitors after completing their exclusive, reserved-seat runs in metropolitan showcase theatres. For example, *The Longest Day* (1962), launched as a roadshow in select engagements in October 1962, enjoyed its ‘first wave’ of general release on 450 prints in summer 1963, followed by a period of withdrawal and then a further wave of 450 theatres in June 1964.³⁹

By 1957, in fact, the previous received wisdom on the relative ‘doldrums’ of the summer had been reversed. In June of that year, *Daily Variety* reported that ‘the trade is anxiously awaiting the anticipated summer pickup. The months of July and August have traditionally become the peak business period for the motion picture industry’.⁴⁰ This was despite the fact that air conditioning, now common in homes, was less of an attraction in

theatres than it had been twenty years before and despite the increased number of pastimes that offered alternative distractions. One of the few advantages that cinema had over competing leisure options was that the summer months were now TV's doldrums.

4. First big-budget major-studio film to be TV-advertised

Although the Hollywood studios initially regarded the postwar advent of network television mainly as a threat through its competition for audiences and were slow to exploit the new medium as an opportunity for advertising and promotion, some publicists recognised its potential early on. One was Terry Turner, who as head of exploitation at RKO used advertising on local TV stations to sell the 1952 reissue of *King Kong* (1933) and helped it to gross more than twice than on its original release; significantly, those territories where TV was available yielded better results than those where it was not.⁴¹ Subsequently as a freelance Turner oversaw many similar campaigns and in trade press articles he advocated the greater use of television as a promotional tool. In 1959, Turner noted that television advertising had still not yet been fully exploited and in particular that the film industry had 'made very little effort to find the right technique to apply it to the so-called "big" pictures and get bigger and better results.'⁴²

Some studios did this selectively in the 1960s, using national TV ads as well as local ones, though the latter were more common. A 1965 trade advertisement by Twentieth Century-Fox proclaimed 'the first sustained, continuing buy by a major motion picture company', involving 189 one-minute commercials aired every week during 'Major-League Championship Baseball' and 'Nightlife' on the national ABC TV network. Among the films thus promoted were such major releases as *The Sound of Music*, *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, *Von Ryan's Express* (all 1965) and *Our Man Flint* (1966). With this strategy, Fox claimed that 'a new era was born in motion picture

advertising! [...] Here at last is the pre-sell... the deep-sell... the continuing-sell exhibitors have been crying for'.⁴³ This was, however, advertising on only one network on a limited number of shows.

According to another trade advertisement ten years later, Universal's campaign for *Jaws* was 'the Biggest National prime-time T.V. Spot campaign in Motion Picture History!', with twenty-three thirty-second spots aired at prime time every night between 17-20 June on all three national networks.⁴⁴ Unusually, exhibitors were required to contribute to the costs of this TV advertising as part of their bids for the right to play the picture in its opening engagements.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, this was the most extensive and expensive TV-spot campaign to date, with a reported \$700,000 spent on TV ads. Even so, it was not the first. In fact, Universal itself had already been using similar TV-advertising strategies with recent releases such as *Airport 1975*, as had other studios with other films. But the most important precursor was Columbia's *Breakout* (1975), which had in effect pre-tested the strategy one month before *Jaws*.⁴⁶

That it was not a foolproof method of promotion was demonstrated by the next major release on which Universal attempted to repeat its own formula. The western *Rooster Cogburn* (1975), bringing back John Wayne in his Oscar-winning role from Paramount's *True Grit* (1969) and casting him for the first and only time opposite Katharine Hepburn, was the subject of a similar promotional and distribution campaign as *Jaws*. A trade advertisement listed the common elements:⁴⁷

Pre-sold property

Prime-time TV spot campaign

Double truck full color

Super saturation

Yet when it opened in October the same year, *Rooster Cogburn*'s box-office performance was mediocre, earning only \$4.8 million in domestic rentals. Effective as it was when allied to the right product, national TV advertising and the other marketable ingredients did not produce a magic formula that could be applied to any film. *Variety*'s year-end report noted the lesson to be learned: 'when John Wayne and Katharine Hepburn can't lure them in, only a shark can'.⁴⁸

5. First big-budget major-studio film to open wide

'Saturation' releases are commonly associated with so-called exploitation pictures – that is to say, films whose success depends on the marketising (exploiting) of topical or sensational subject matter, rather than those which are merely 'exploitative' in the everyday sense. Industry wisdom has it that wide-release distribution and exhibition strategies were traditionally used for low-budget stinkers, aiming to make a quick hit-and-run before word got around about their poor quality or failure to deliver on the promises of their advertising. While undoubtedly there was some truth in this, it was not the only reason for wide releasing, which has a longer and more complex history than might be supposed. Another reason for wide or 'instant' releases was to capitalise on presumed 'want-to-see', either created artificially through elaborate promotional campaigns or because the ingredients of the film already had built-in public awareness by being 'pre-sold' – for example, through the presence of an established star, the use of extensive pre-release publicity or by being based on a well-known literary property. In any of these cases, there would be an audience ready and waiting for whom the gradual build-up of word-of-mouth was unnecessary or even counter-productive.⁴⁹

There were two basic kinds of wide release: intensive regional saturation, in which a large number of prints and theatre bookings was targeted on a particular area (such as a city, state or broader region); and simultaneous nationwide releasing, in which a large number of theatres in different areas across the country gained ‘instant’ access to a film. Among the earliest films to be given local saturation bookings were Charlie Chaplin’s short comedies for the Mutual Corporation. Beginning with *The Floorwalker* (1916), between 200 and 300 prints (several times the number for an ordinary short or feature) were used for each of the sixteen Mutual pictures made by the star comedian in 1916-17. In the case of the three-reeler *A Dog’s Life* (1918), released by First National, 160 prints were used in Greater New York alone, while 200 prints were used for territorial bookings of Chaplin’s first full-length feature, *The Kid* (1921).⁵⁰ In the early sound era, Warner Bros. and RKO Radio both established a policy of ‘day and date’ releases in which around 300 prints of new sound films such as Warners’ *The Desert Song* (1929) and RKO’s *Cimarron* (1931) were made available to first-run exhibitors in major cities simultaneously with Broadway pre-release engagements.⁵¹

The seemingly antithetical distribution strategies of roadshowing (associated primarily with prestige pictures) and saturation releasing were sometimes used in alternation for particular films, depending on the territory or the stage of release. David O. Selznick’s epic western *Duel in the Sun* (1946) opened as an exclusive roadshow in Los Angeles in late 1946, but was saturation-released the following summer in territories such as Greater New York, Texas and California. Shortly afterwards, Twentieth Century-Fox opened its bestseller adaptation *Forever Amber* (1947) nationwide with 475 prints, reported as one of the largest print orders to that time. Both of these films were successively the most expensive films yet made, each costing more than *Gone with the Wind* (1939), though neither enjoyed much critical acclaim.

Most major studios used both regional saturation and wide national releases throughout the 1950s, often for horror and science-fiction pictures such as Warners' *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), which opened in 614 theatres in its first two weeks of release.⁵² But westerns and other films with rural settings were also often given saturation treatment in the south and mid-west: Warner Bros. claimed a record 651 simultaneous openings for *The Boy from Oklahoma* (1954).⁵³ In the late 1950s and early 1960s, showman and producer-distributor Joseph E. Levine specialised in large-scale releases of Italian costume adventures and Japanese creature features, supported by extravagant advertising campaigns; it is probably pictures such as these – most notably *Hercules* (1958) – that are responsible for the common association of wide releases with lowbrow trash. But Levine later applied the same principle to big-budget pictures such as the Harold Robbins adaptation *The Carpetbaggers* (1964), released nationwide by Paramount in over 700 prints to considerable box-office success, though again little esteem.⁵⁴ Some companies even opted for simultaneous global first runs. MGM's *The V.I.P.s* (1963) was planned for simultaneous release in 2,000 theatres in 750 cities around the world, which would have made it the 'biggest mass release ever in film history'. *Variety* reported it as opening in '172 theatres in 89 cities of 30 countries' outside the U.S. and Canada.⁵⁵ Five years later, Paramount's *Barbarella* (1968) was launched simultaneously 'in 41 nations, in over 1,000 theatres' worldwide.⁵⁶

Also in the mid-1960s, United Artists developed a strategy of multiple first runs, a policy it called Premiere Showcase, which was subsequently taken up by other distributors. It was used on a wide range of pictures, most successfully the James Bond series. The Bond films were typically released with 500-600 prints for the domestic market. *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), for example, opened at the end of the year in 104 theatres in thirty-three U.S. Canadian territories, including twenty-eight theatres in New York and nineteen in New

Jersey, plus fifty-seven situations in twenty-five overseas cities.⁵⁷ In the summer of 1973, UA struck 600 prints for the Bond film *Live and Let Die* (1973), 550 for the musical *Tom Sawyer* (1973) and 450 for the general release of *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), which had opened as a roadshow.⁵⁸ Two years later, UA had 500 prints ready for the summer release of *The Return of the Pink Panther* (1975) while *Jaws* was waiting in the wings.⁵⁹ But the widest simultaneous domestic release of any major-studio film until the 1980s came in May 1975. One month before the release of *Jaws*, Columbia's Charles Bronson vehicle *Breakout* opened in more than 1,300 U.S. and Canadian theatres, in what a trade ad described as 'the most spectacular saturation blitz of any motion picture'.⁶⁰

What is most remarkable about the wide release of *Jaws*, in the light of the claims often made about it and in the context of predecessors such as these, is that it could so easily have been much wider – that it was not, in fact, as wide as had initially been intended. There have been a number of published accounts, including Spielberg's own, of the aftermath of the film's second, enormously successful, public preview at Long Beach on 28 March 1975, attended by a cadre of Universal executives including MCA president Lew Wasserman.⁶¹ In a post-screening debriefing, Wasserman instructed his distribution staff to cut back on a release strategy planned to include around one thousand simultaneous theatre openings (the exact number varies from one account to another). Rather than saturating the market in order to ensure a quick return on investment, Wasserman wanted the film to remain in circulation throughout the summer, in extended engagements that would extract the maximum possible revenue from each booking. In order to do that, the number of bookings was substantially reduced from the initial estimate to avoid 'milking' the picture too quickly and thereby reducing its theatrical life. Those theatres eventually chosen to receive the picture in the first wave of openings (409 in the United States, fifty-five in Canada) had to guarantee a minimum twelve-week run. So although there were ultimately more than 1,000 prints in

domestic circulation, theatre engagements were added gradually throughout the summer and fall as the film gathered momentum rather than saturating the opening weeks.

Wasserman's motivation for this revised strategy was surely his recognition that, unlike a majority of exploitation pictures, *Jaws* delivered on the promise of its advertising, as manifested in the audience reaction that night. As a consequence, the wide-release strategy for big-budget studio pictures gained greater credibility, even if the film had not in fact introduced it. In the first of a still-continuing series of annual box-office commentaries published in the US magazine *Film Comment*, Stuart Byron drew specific attention to

'Universal's unique distribution pattern for *Jaws*. It used to be that the opening of a movie everywhere at once was a signal to most of the public that the picture was a stiff [...]. But in opening at 500 theatres in late June, *Jaws* was the ultimate beneficiary of a trend toward so-called "wide" openings, with attendant saturation advertising campaigns centered on television'.⁶²

As a consequence of *Jaws*, Byron noted, 'the psychological effects of this particular way of releasing a picture have been neutralized; the public accepts or rejects a film released this way, as the case may be. And this is an interesting development. It has been little noticed that the history of film distribution in America is the history of the neutralization of release patterns; a method of "throwing away" a movie is transformed into a way of indicating its importance.'⁶³

Conclusion

If an 'event movie' is understood as meaning the kind of film which becomes a cultural phenomenon or a must-see attraction, then we need to look back as far as *The Birth of a*

Nation (1915) for the most significant predecessor of *Jaws*. But if we restrict our attention to the New Hollywood era, then much of what has been claimed for *Jaws* can also be said, in some respects more convincingly, of one of the immediately preceding blockbusters against which its performance was often compared: *The Godfather*.

Researcher Michael Coate has tabulated all 464 opening engagements of *Jaws*, in an online article which convincingly refutes the myth of its nationwide opening as representing any kind of record.⁶⁴ Coate's listings show that only five cities had simultaneous bookings in three or more theatres, and only thirteen had two concurrent runs; the rest were exclusive engagements in their respective communities, albeit in multiple cities and towns in each state. This was the *Godfather* policy almost exactly, on an only slightly larger scale. Paramount president Frank Yablans rejected the term 'saturation' as a description of his simultaneous national release strategy for *The Godfather*, which involved booking the film into a small number of theatres in each area for twelve-week runs to maximise potential. Beginning with around 400 engagements opening in February 1972, the film's release expanded to involve around one thousand prints in circulation by the end of the year.⁶⁵ This anticipated many of the key features of the *Jaws* distribution strategy, which has little in common with the kind of mass coverage, opening on a thousand or more screens, which only became commonplace in the 1980s and largely thanks to the influence of other films besides *Jaws*, including the remake of *King Kong* (1976).⁶⁶

Jaws, then, had many ancestors; it borrowed from the promotional and distribution strategies developed for many films over the previous three decades, refining, enhancing, combining and synthesising them with peculiar effectiveness. Not only in the way it did this but also in the spectacular degree of its commercial success, *Jaws* undoubtedly set a new benchmark for box-office performance and persuaded subsequent films' distributors to emulate its example. It anticipated many later developments in, for example, the increased

importance of wide releases of big-budget films in the summer and other holiday seasons. More than most films, it has served as a reference point for contemporary blockbuster cinema. It is important, influential, impressive and of continuing relevance. But it was not the first.

Notes

¹ Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds.), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 17.

² Janet Maslin, 'Film: Golden Ages; Just Before They Invented the Blockbuster', *New York Times*, 1 May 1994; online <at <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/01/movies/film-golden-ages-just-before-they-invented-the-blockbuster.html>>.

³ Douglas Gomery, 'Hollywood corporate business practice and periodizing contemporary film history', in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds.), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 51.

⁴ Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: an Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 55.

⁵ Linda Ruth Williams, 'Exploitation Cinema', in Pam Cook, ed., *The Cinema Book* (Third Edition, London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 300.

⁶ Ryan Gilbey, *It Don't Worry Me: the Revolutionary American Films of the Seventies* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003), 85.

⁷ Alex Ben Block and Lucy Autrey Wilson (eds.), *George Lucas's Blockbusting* (New York: It Books/HarperCollins, 2010), 508.

⁸ Connie Bruck, *When Hollywood Had a King: the Reign of Lew Wasserman, Who Leveraged Talent into Power and Influence* (New York: Random House, 2003), 343-4.

⁹ Mark Shiel, 'The Seventies: Introduction', in Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (eds.), *Contemporary American Cinema* (Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2006), 117.

¹⁰ Daniel Borden, Florian Duijsens, Thomas Gilbert and Adele Smith, *Film: a World History* (London: Herbert Press, 2008), 306.

¹¹ Warren Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (New York and London: 2006), 86.

¹² Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 278.

¹³ Tom Schatz, 'The Studio System and Corporate Hollywood', in Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (eds.), *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, Oxford and Carlton, 2008), 19-20.

¹⁴ Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', 19.

¹⁵ Borden, Duijsens, Gilbert and Smith, *Film: a World History*, 306; Warren Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (New York and London: 2006), 86.

¹⁶ Gomery, 'The Hollywood Blockbuster: Industrial analysis and practice', 72; Justin Wyatt, 'From Roadshowing to Saturation Release: Majors, Independents, and Marketing/Distribution Innovations', in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The New American Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 79.

¹⁷ A.D. Murphy, 'Sockeroo *Jaws* gross: what about rentals?', *Variety*, 27 August 1975, 7.

¹⁸ Schatz, 'The Studio System and Corporate Hollywood', 20.

¹⁹ Coate, '*Jaws*...Happy 35th!'

²⁰ The advertisement was published in *Variety* on 24 September 1975, 48; the box-office report had appeared as 'Updated all-time film champs', *Variety*, 8 January 1975, 26.

²¹ Murphy, ‘Sockeroo *Jaws* gross: what about rentals?’, *op cit.*

²² A.D. Murphy, ‘*Jaws* spectacular B.O. thrust to top \$300-mil in global rentals’, *Variety*, 10 December 1975, 5; Robert B. Frederick, ‘Terror-joy of *Jaws*: \$102,650,000’, *Variety*, 7 January 1976, 18; A.D. Murphy, ‘Universal Pics make film history’, *Variety*, 21 January 1976, 1.

²³ Anon., ‘Reprise as to *Jaws*’, *Variety*, 21 January 1976, 102. Overseas opening dates are listed in Michael Coate, ‘*Jaws*...Happy 35th!’, *Cinema Treasures*, posted 18 June 2010; online at <<http://cinematreasures.org/blog/2010/6/18/jaws-happy-35th>>.

²⁴ Anon., ‘All-Time film rental champs (of U.S.-Canadian market)’, *Variety*, 16 January 1985, 28).

²⁵ Douglas Gomery and Clara Pafort-Overduin, *Movie History: a Survey* (Second Edition, New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 284-5; Douglas Gomery, ‘The Hollywood Blockbuster: Industrial analysis and practice’, in Julian Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge, 2003), 72.

²⁶ For extended discussions of the etymological origins, applications and implications of the term, see: Charles R. Acland, ‘Senses of Success and the Rise of the Blockbuster’, *Film History*, 25: 1–2 (2013); and Sheldon Hall, ‘Pass the Ammunition: a Short Etymology of “Blockbuster”’, in Andrew B.R. Elliott (ed.), *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

²⁷ For further discussion of these terms, see the Introduction to Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: a Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).

²⁸ See, for example, *Variety*’s headline ‘NBC-TV’s blockbustin’ lineup’, 22 August 1951, 31.

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- ²⁹ Gene Arneel, '1958: Year of blockbusters', *Variety*, 7 January 1959; Penelope Houston and John Gillett, 'The Theory and Practice of Blockbusting', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1963; William Fadiman, 'Blockbusters or bust?', *Films and Filming*, February 1963.
- ³⁰ Gordon Gow, 'Jaws' (review), *Films and Filming*, January 1976, 31; Tom Milne, 'Jaws' (review), *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1975, 264.
- ³¹ James Monaco, 'Jaws' (review), *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1975-76, 56.
- ³² *Variety*, 15 July 1942, 5, 25.
- ³³ *Variety*, 29 May 1946, 3.
- ³⁴ *Variety*, 16 September 1936, 5.
- ³⁵ *Variety*, 5 July 1939, 3, 12.
- ³⁶ *Variety*, 22 July 1942, 6.
- ³⁷ *Variety*, 3 July 1946, 1, 20.
- ³⁸ *Variety*, 11 July 1956, 18; 19 February 1958, 4.
- ³⁹ *Variety*, 26 June 1963, 7; advertisement, 20 November 1963, 5.
- ⁴⁰ *Daily Variety*, 26 June 1957, 1, 3.
- ⁴¹ *Variety*, 21 January 1953, 20.
- ⁴² *Variety*, 8 April 1959, p. 17.
- ⁴³ Advertisement, *Variety*, 28 April 1965, 14.
- ⁴⁴ Advertisement, *Variety*, 9 April 1975, 10-11.
- ⁴⁵ *Variety*, 16 April 1975, 3.
- ⁴⁶ See Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 278.
- ⁴⁷ Advertisement, *Variety*, 23 July 1975, 14-15.
- ⁴⁸ Robert B. Frederick, 'Terror-joy of "Jaws": \$102,650,000', *Variety*, 7 January 1976, 18.
- ⁴⁹ On the tradition of wide releasing, see: Brian Hannan, *In Theaters Everywhere: a History of the Hollywood Wide Release, 1917-2017* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018).

⁵⁰ *Variety*, 26 April 1918, 45; Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, 45; *Variety*, 11 March 1921, 33.

⁵¹ Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, 97.

⁵² Advertisements, *Variety*, 27 May 1953, 12, and 1 July 1953, 12-13.

⁵³ Advertisement, *Variety*, 27 January 1954, 21.

⁵⁴ *Variety*, 24 June 1974.

⁵⁵ *Variety*, 17 July 1963, 22; 18 September 1963, 19.

⁵⁶ Advertisement, *Variety*, 4 September 1968, 12-13.

⁵⁷ *Variety*, 15 December 1971, 13; advertisement, 22 December 1971, 26.

⁵⁸ *Variety*, 13 June 1973, 4.

⁵⁹ *Variety*, 11 June 1975, 4.

⁶⁰ *Variety*, 7 May 1975, 40.

⁶¹ See, for example: Bruck, *When Hollywood Had a King*, 342-3; Dade Hayes and Jonathan Bing, *Open Wide: How Hollywood Box Office Became a National Obsession* (New York: Hyperion/Miramax, 2004), 159-60; Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: a Biography* (New York and London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 258.

⁶² Stuart Byron, 'First Annual Grosses Gloss', *Film Comment*, March-April 1976, 30.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Michael Coate, 'The Game Changer: Celebrating "Jaws" on Its 40th Anniversary', online at <<http://www.thedigitalbits.com/columns/history-legacy--showmanship/remembering-jaws-40th>>.

⁶⁵ *Variety*, 17 November 1971, 4.

⁶⁶ Connie Bruck also notes *The Godfather* as the model for *Jaws*: *When Hollywood Had a King*, 343-4. On their immediate successors, see Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, 213.