

JAWS

Directed by Steven Spielberg
Produced by David Brown and Richard D. Zanuck
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1975

The miniature made monumental, *Jaws* is the story of a police chief fighting to preserve the safety of a community he has sworn to protect. The problem is that the community values profit over caution, and with the imminent arrival of summertime tourists, the beach community of Amity, Massachusetts doesn't want to take any chances. So hard truths are ignored, and violent death is given a soft gloss. Martin Brody is the new police chief, dealing with his first summer on the island after a career feeling helpless on the NYPD. But in Amity one man can make a difference, he says. And if they don't care what he does for them, he's got his family to think about, too. He and his wife, Ellen, are made to feel as outsiders, and they've got a real bad thing going there, but Chief Brody is going to take a stand, to defend Amity and defend his family.

But, in a way, that's only the first half of the film. Once the ORCA sets sail, oceanographer Matt Hooper and grizzled shark hunter Quint badger, bicker, and rage, with Brody in the middle. They are the experts, one a rich academic, the other a jaundiced man of the sea. Each has his own way of doing things, and each is seen to fail. Brody is the man we identify with through the whole film and, ultimately, because he is the chosen defender, he must kill the shark. He shuddered at the crime and hopelessness engulfing New York, seeking empowerment by his escape. For a time he is crushed by the bureaucracy and collective delusion of Amity, but he soon breaks free to fight—not his fellow man, but a wild beast of the deep preying on the innocent. He takes a stand, and at long last Martin Brody is justified. We identify with his ultimate triumph because it is the victory of any man—not redoubtable, not formidable—who is characterized by his conviction; sacrificing all he has, this man says, "I will go, send me."

In the first half of the film we establish Brody as a family man and the harassed chief of police. He balances both roles well. After Chrissie has been killed in the first attack, the mayor, Larry Vaughn, shuts down Brody's attempts to alert the public. Thus follows Alex Kintner's death. In this scene, Brody is asked by his wife if their sons should go in the water. He says it is fine. So he is consistent. But we can still see that he is anxiously monitoring the bathers. After several false alarms, the young boy is killed.

Later in the film, Mrs. Kintner slaps Brody's face and says that she found out that he knew there was a shark, but let people go swimming anyway. Brody makes no excuses. After she leaves, the mayor leans over and rejects her as overwrought. "I'm sorry, Martin...she's wrong." Brody replies that she is not wrong. The mayor wants her to be wrong, because he's the one who shut down Brody; if Brody should be slapped, the mayor should be pilloried. Also, Larry is saying that it was worth the risk, to keep the businesses primed for the imminent tourists.

But the sun-loving revelers of July 4th are terrorized, not entertained. With three to five people dead, Larry is pressed to sign the order to pay Quint \$10,000 to kill the shark. Signing it would be an admission of failure, but Brody pushes him hard until he relents. It's the first time that Brody gets the upper hand in his struggle against the mayor. He almost fell into a trap of irrelevance, like the coroner. But now, instead of rolling over, the Chief does the barking.

Brody has a warm relationship with his wife, and they try hard to encourage each other as the shark makes waves. Together, they attempt to shield their two sons without frightening them. (An interesting detail: When Martin is called at the beginning of the movie, and alerted to a missing person, at that very instant his son asks his mother if he can go swimming.) Ironically, when the beach is packed with tourists for the Independence Day regatta, Brody asks his son Michael to take his sailboat into the estuary; of course, this is where the shark strikes next.

One of the keys to the first half of *Jaws* is establishing the shark as a formidable opponent. He is strong and can kill fast. When boat after boat with spotters and riflemen are gunning for him, he hits the estuary, where nobody's on guard. We know from our fleeting glimpse and Hooper's insightful deductions that he is very large, a Great White. And once he starts eating, he has no reason to leave. He must be killed. Hooper and Quint are professionals, but a little too cocksure. Brody boards the ORCA with a heavy heart and his six-shooter. His farewell to Ellen plays like a last goodbye. They both know this could be it.

In the second half of the film, Brody continues to advise caution. He proposes that they get a bigger boat (he's the first to see the shark, appropriately enough) and tries to radio for help. He's pretty much ignored by the other two, who never seem to take Brody seriously.

Hooper and Quint are almost exact opposites. Hooper is in his twenties. When he was twelve and a baby thresher ate up a boat his dad bought him he fell in love with sharks, dedicating his life to their study. Immediately after his Amity consulting foray was complete, Hooper was planning to join an eighteen-month sea expedition, for research. Instead, he decides to stay in Amity, because there is plenty to learn right where he is. When they first spot the shark, Hooper takes photographs.

Quint gets out his harpoons. He's in his fifties, a tough sailor with a lot of experience killing sharks. His drafty boathouse speaks to this fact—probably one hundred shark jaws are hung about as his sole concession to decorating. He hates sharks. And who can blame him? His formative experience was drifting in the Pacific for days on end while sharks picked off his fellow navy men, the doomed crew of the torpedoed *Indianapolis*.

Quint seems to have a rendezvous with death. He destroys the radio, denying them any help, and he throttles the engine until the ORCA is reduced to drifting. He wants to go out alone, but Brody, with the charter, insists on coming along with Hooper. Maybe Quint wants to make peace for surviving those terrible days in 1945, killing as many sharks as he can, until falling prey to one, himself.

Hooper is a fun character, very smart, a tad arrogant, kind of a smart aleck. One of the big fights with Quint involves the nature of the fish that Quint hooks shortly after they've started searching for the man-eater. Is it a shark or is it a gaming fish? Hooper

condescendingly says it's not a shark. Quint says it is. Hooper gets banged around by the fish when he tries to take hold of the line. Quint says don't tell me my business again, but Hooper won't concede. Quint then observes that Hooper is not man enough to admit when he is wrong.

It *was* the shark. (The evidence is not in the story, but the way the scene is shot, and the music that accompanies it.) We do see later, when Quint's burned out the engine, that he won't admit to being wrong for putting them all in danger, with no power to escape the shark.

Because of Quint's great blunder, Hooper must go underwater in a shark cage to kill the beast. But the shark comes from the opposite direction he had before, catching Hooper by surprise, and thus he loses his precious poison-tipped weapon. Close combat ensues, with Hooper slashing at the fish with his knife (Quint will do the same minutes later, with less success). This is the most exciting part of the film. Somehow Hooper escapes, and, with Quint dead, Brody must tackle the fish alone. He has been afraid of water all his life. He only went out with Hooper and Quint because he had to. Now it's up to him. He swallows his fears, and performs his duties with bravery and brilliance. He is the hero of *Jaws*.

With a surfaced Hooper, Chief Brody swims to shore using the two remaining barrels designed to kill the shark but now saving their lives. Brody comments, knowingly, "I used to hate the water." Hooper replies, "I can't imagine why." Looking beyond the irony, the significance of this exchange is that Brody has conquered his fears. Hooper now understands why Brody was afraid. But the Chief is not afraid any more. In the water is death and life, first defeat...now victory. Brody's formative experience comes much later than his comrades'. It is the climax of the film, destroying the shark. He has nothing to be afraid of now. He has fought the hard fight and conquered, against all odds.

The same could be said of Steven Spielberg. The *Jaws* shoot was as arduous as they come, the young director saddled with a mechanical shark that rarely worked. He improvised solutions minimizing the shark of objective reality, and maximizing the shark of our imagination, bringing the film out of shock into suspense. His staging was innovative (the wipe-on, wipe-off continuous-flow Kintner beach scene; the silent dinner with Brody and his imitative son; the pier getting ripped apart then *turning around*; the bonding sing-along interrupted by the battering-ram shark as first Quint, then Hooper, then Brody grow silent with dread...and the light goes out).

For all the talk of the shark being unconvincing, critics ignore the fact that a lot of good detail about sharks' behavior is evidenced in *Jaws*. For instance, because of their poor visual acuity, sharks will often bump into something before they start chewing on it, to find out what it is. This is what the shark does with the boats in the estuary and with Hooper's cage. Also, when a shark doesn't move through the water, it sinks. And the water has to run into his gills to breathe. So when the shark menaces Brody at the film's conclusion, first breaking the glass of the ORCA cabin and then trying to bite at him when he's perched on the mast, the shark has to go out and come back. If he doesn't go and make another run, he'll die. Of course, on that third run he dies anyway.

Here's the best example of the care invested in the storytelling: When Matt Hooper arrives, he is greeted by a big man who pulls Hooper out of his boat onto the dock. The stare at each other for a few seconds, sizing each other up, saying hello. That night, when Hooper and

Brody in their questing find a busted-up hull floating in isolation, Hooper investigates, underwater, coming face to face with the corpse of the man he met that morning—Ben Gardner.

Shepherding the project through almost two years of anguish, fighting the studio, the town of Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard, Robert Shaw, the Teamsters, and untold others, Spielberg transformed a cheap, ugly novel into something beautiful. The closing scene ranks as one of the greatest in movies. Finally we have peace, the monster dead. Two friends reunite and quietly mourn the loss of one of their own. They swim to shore together as the credits roll, reaching the beach as the screen fades to black.