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Living History of *Jaws*

When it comes to historical moments or events that have a “taking the nation/world by storm” effect, they tend to have a historical significance based off of how those who experienced them were affected. How people were affected by these events can range from being relatively neutral to changing entire aspects of their lives. Events such as 9/11 made U.S. citizens feel like we have to be extra cautious against those entering the nation who hail from other countries, especially those with Middle-Eastern backgrounds. Even mere films have had great, albeit usually temporary, effects on viewers. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* made people terrified to take showers after watching the assumed main character get stabbed to death. Even I’ve been affected, I’ve caught myself instinctively closing my eyes for very short periods of time while showering after knowing about that one scene in Hitchcock’s classic. However, my personal effect from that infamous shower-murder scene in *Psycho* was not from watching the film itself, but from how others have remembered it, and how the media has referred back to it many times in the past. This has happened to many films other than *Psycho*, and that film arguably doesn’t even have anywhere near the biggest effect on individuals due to the media’s assistance. There is a film however, that has such an effect over multiple decades due to its content and how media refers to it combined with people’s collective and individual memories. That film of course is Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*, and its effect on not only the U.S, but the world still shows. From how people view sharks, to how sharks are treated, and to how certain

protocols were even set in place, all are a result off Spielberg's film, the media, and the collective memory of those who experienced it.

Aspects of Collective Memory and its influence by Media

When referring to something such as collective memory, people tend to be thrown off by what that entails. When events happen in different points of history, they don't just occur and then someone puts it down in a history, ending the whole debacle. Susan A. Crane states in her article *Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory* that "Perhaps the most banal thing that could be said about history, in general, is that 'it happened,' or something happened." She goes on to say that "... it is also written or produced about those pasts both then and now" (Crane 1372). What Crane is referring to is that moments in history are often recorded and produced to be shown and reminded to others. History or powerful moments in history can be reproduced and exist in the future through different mediums, examples include television, articles, textbooks etc. The film *Jaws* would be preserved through well, film of course, but also on television and posters and even museums. I myself have seen the main movie poster of the film multiple times, the dark blue waters with the female swimmer floating on top, with the monstrosity sized great white shark not too far below her, ready to attack. It's a very recognizable piece of media that has stuck itself into many people's memories, and has become immensely iconic over the decades since the film's release. Through different media, *Jaws* was kept alive and became further imbedded into the collective memory of American society. But of course the individual memories of those who experienced such moments in history are also equally as important when it comes to the whole idea of collective memory. Later in her article, Crane explains that "the difference between collective memory and

historical memory marks the separation between lived experience and the preservation of lived experience.” But at the same time she also mentions that “historical memory, always appearing in the form of historical narrative, is one form for the content of collective memory” (Crane 1373). To elaborate, Crane notes that collective memory and historical memory are part of the same idea, preserving lived experiences and retelling them as historical context in different forms of media. This properly encapsulates the importance of media with collective memory, as the different forms of media tend to assist in the structure of the quite literal collective memory of the film *Jaws*.

As its name implies, collective memory is a collection of the different experiences and recordings of historical events and other moments people experience. Social memory is another part of what makes up collective memory. Individual memories are obviously the past experiences of individual people, but like Amanda Barnier in her article “*From individual to collective memory: Theoretical and empirical perspectives*” states, “Very often our memories of the past are of experiences or events we shared with others.” She continues to list off examples of memories such as “parents and children reminisce about significant family events, friends discuss a movie they just saw together,” and so on (Barnier 1). It was interesting that she brought up films, as discussing a film adds to the collective memory of a subject like *Jaws*. It isn’t hard to imagine that the terrifying imagery and the home-hitting theme of the film would spark some conversations between two friends or relatives whom watched the film together. Watching a film with other people and then speaking about it with others acts as an extension for the structure of collective memory. Especially now at days, many films are massively discussed about not only with professional critics such as the late and great Gene Siskel and

Robert Ebert, but also among average movie goers. More people converse on the now more controversial and/or thought provoking topics of films, even if it wasn't the goal of many films, such as *Jaws*.

Impact of *Jaws* on the public

While it is now understood how it is generally possible for a film like *Jaws* to have such a great influence via media as many other classic films do, there still begs the question of what that influence was, and what exactly did the aspects of collective memory and the media do to provoke such an influence. To give context, the film *Jaws* as stated before, was directed by Steven Spielberg and released in 1975. The story takes place on Amity Island, a New England beach resort that has recently been under attacks by an unnaturally ginormous great white shark. Now the sheriff of the town along with a marine biologist and a man who claims he can kill the monster band together to stop the killer shark before it claims the lives of more civilians. Throughout the film, the great white prowls the waters of Amity's beaches, hunting down and ripping apart unsuspecting swimmers and surfers. While there were many films in the past and many films today that try to copy *Jaws'* theme of "killer shark goes loose and kills people," it wasn't as common of a theme back in the 70's. Combine that with the fact that shark attacks are an actual thing that happens to beaches around the world, and there are bound to be some greatly affected, specifically terrified, audience members after watching the horror show. Those who either lived near or frequented beaches were likely the most affected. *Jaws* was such an influential film, that it actually brought attention towards real life sharks on coastal regions.

Because of the fact that the film *Jaws* was able to hit home to a lot of people while also terrifying them, it has actually caused a harmful stigma against actual wild sharks in the ocean. In the article *Great White Sharks: Mindless Eating Machines or Intelligent Alpha Predators?* By Rebecca Herren and Matthew Gallaher, the two make the statement that “great white sharks have a reputation of being ‘man-eating, killing machines’ that, according to the movie *Jaws*, have only three things they know how to do: ‘eat, swim, and make little sharks.’” The two also make the point that the reputation that these sea dwellers are given is more “imaginary fear” than reality (Herren 1). This is the main influence the film has had with its audiences, by showing them the idea of an animal in the ecosystem being a ravenous monster that’s hell-bent on brutally killing and consuming everything it sees, it builds upon the structure of their collective memory that this is how real life great white sharks behave. To beg the question on why audiences didn’t already know that sharks actually follow less lethal, to humans at least, instincts, Herren and Gallaher elaborate on that, stating that “most people around the world have never intentionally entered the water with a shark and observed their behavior, but they have seen *Jaws*, where the image of a massive great white shark devouring every human that crosses its path is designed to strike an instinctive fear in its audience” (Herren 1-2). It’s easy to say that the media aspect of *Jaws* is the more important part of how the collective memory of audiences and even those who haven’t seen the movie is built upon, similarly to how I haven’t seen *Psycho*, but know of the infamous shower scene.

Interview with Living History

As a way of communicating the aspects of individual, social, and collective memory, I myself had conducted an interview with someone who lived during the release of *Jaws*, and is

still living today in a world where we have most certainly put more attention on great white sharks after the film was released. I interviewed my mother, Mary Ellen Rickards, and asked of her experience watching the film *Jaws* and her experiences observing the effect the media had with people and the film. I would hope that the individual memory of her experience would help paint a good picture of how the film and media had affected others' individual memories, thus creating a structure for the collective memory of how people viewed sharks after the film's release, and even how they're viewed today.

As an appropriate start, I asked her if she had seen the film when it first came out, her reply with "Yes, I saw *Jaws* at the movie theater near my home town when it first came out in 1975. I had just turned 20 years old." This was perfect, as that information assured me that her experiences were at an age she could easily remember, and that the time was right when the effect the film had was just taking place. I then asked her what were some reactions of hers and that of family members or friends. Her reply consisted of her reminiscing about how the film split her between either being fascinated by some scenes, and horrified by others. She even recalled hiding her face from "gorier" scenes, an example being the scene where they find body parts washed up ashore the day after a brutal attack, with my mother's friends having the same reactions. The film was something she had never seen before, being realistic to her at the time of its showing, which she called "spine-tingling." She even mentioned that this made shark attacks in real life seem like such an easy thing to occur.

Another question I brought up was what advertising was like for the film. She made a point to mention that any trailer she saw, or at least could remember, "showed very little of the film, save for the most sensational scenes: the girl swimming in the ocean at night who realizes

something has her; the three men who go hunting for the shark and see it charging at them; the beach scene where the public panics at the sight of the shark, and so on.” She led into the fact that the ads would actually show very little of the shark, but made you feel the presence of it very clear. With her strong emotions towards seeing the advertisements and the film itself, I begged the question of whether the film influenced how she viewed sharks and how. My mother replied saying that “Since so little was publicly known about sharks when the film was released, it left a deep mark on me and so many others:” she closed her answer stating that “I didn’t necessarily believe they specifically hunted humans, but thought they hunted and ate anything, including humans.” It seemed that my mother was not as affected by the film as others, to confirm this thought, I asked her if she was afraid to go in the ocean after seeing the movie. She replied with the fact that she was always an avid swimmer and beachgoer, so the film wasn’t enough to stop her from doing that. However, she did mention that she would no longer swim alone or without the presence of lifeguards, and wouldn’t go as far out into the ocean as she used to.

The next two questions I asked her about involved if she noticed any significant change in media coverage of sharks and shark attacks, and if she noticed any changes in other people’s attitudes towards sharks. My mother replied saying that the media had begun putting more focus on sharks, like shark sightings and attacks. She remembered this happening for years. As to the public’s attitude, she stated that “There absolutely were changes in people’s attitudes towards sharks. Many people became afraid of sharks and viewed them as blood-thirsty sea monsters who would seek out and attack humans.” She goes on to say how fisherman would deliberately go shark-hunting and that the media would even cover some of the catches with

people cheering. By the looks of it, my mother was likely one of the lesser-affected individuals when it came to that film. A stigma towards sharks had been developing, and took hold quite fast. But while focusing on the past is important, I decided to ask her about any possible changes over time.

My final question was on whether she saw any examples of how people view sharks now, based off of when they watched *Jaws* or similar films when they first came out. She answers saying that she can still see some of that, but with less “mass hysteria” involved. However, what she said next was quite interesting. She the point that “In more recent years, marine biologists have been reporting their studies that show sharks as predators attracted to motion and the scent of blood, rather than hunters of humans.” She continued to say how there were many realizations, and that we had misunderstood sharks on many points. So it seems that my mother had brought me to the realization that *Jaws* had more than one type of effect on people’s collective memory. Though, the more positive aspect didn’t seem to come through until a while after the first one took hold.

What *Jaws* entails for actual sharks

The situation with *Jaws* and sharks had become pretty tense with the influence of media. As mentioned in my interview with my mother, the film and media coverage had influenced fishermen to specifically target sharks in fishing trips, with people even celebrating the death of any shark. The influence of the film and media on people’s collective memory had gotten so out of control, that the author of the original novel Spielberg based the film off of, now regrets writing the book of the dangerous sea dweller. In the year 2000, Peter Benchley,

author of *Jaws*, told the “Animal Attack Files” that he regretted writing the novel. To quote Benchley, he stated that “what I now know, which wasn’t known when I wrote *Jaws*, is that there is no such thing as a rogue shark which develops a taste for human flesh,” also mentioning that “humans kill between 50 and 100 million sharks each year,” “but sharks only kill a handful of humans” (Pohl 2). Benchley shows great concern for how sharks are treated, making the case that people don’t really appreciate how vulnerable sharks can be to destruction, and how hunters use works such as *Jaws* as an excuse to keep hunting more of them (Pohl 2). Despite the fact that sharks kill humans far less than what most people think, they are killed in great numbers in the names of sport, the fish market, and to supposedly protect people, even though the odds of dying in a shark attack are “1 in 3.7 million” (Pohl 2). The media influence of *Jaws* had become so massive, that there is now a term for Australian policy making called “The Jaws Effect” (Neff 114). In Christopher Neff’s article “The *Jaws* Effect: How movie narratives are used to influence policy responses to shark bites in Western Australia”, he analyzes how influential shark attacks have become in the Australian policy making process, thanks to the film *Jaws*. He makes a quick example of this by making the case that “following shark bites, there are often pressures placed on governments to act. These highly emotional issues present unique and complex public policy questions” (Neff 1). Due to the collective memory of how sharks are viewed due to the *Jaws* novel and film, sharks have a heavy prejudice against them in many nations, especially Australia. Any sort of shark attack, especially those fatal, can result in a drastic policy change. “Three elements of the *Jaws* Effect are reviewed including the intentionality of the shark, perception that these events are fatal and the belief the ‘the shark’ must be killed” (Neff 1). Neff even speaks of the extreme

escalations that shark related incidents receive, stating that “There are circumstances when one event may result in little or no response, yet the same event occurring (or appearing to occur) a second or third time results in a dramatic escalation of policy responses.” Of course these would also be related to whether or not the shark attacks were fatal, as mentioned in some of the elements of the *Jaws* Effect (Neff 2).

However, despite the both negative and hostile stigma towards great whites and other species of sharks, there has also been an increase to research done on them. Similar to what my mother said in the interview, the article “Before and after ‘Jaws’: Changing representations of shark attacks” by Beryl Francis, mentions that “While the films *Jaws* (and the media) undoubtedly did damage to shark populations, it also produced significant public and scientific interest in the animals” (Francis 45). Francis goes on to explain that the media, while reporting on shark related incidents, also increased the number of science-related articles. In a sense, the media spread of *Jaws* has acted as a double-edged sword in a sense. Francis elaborates more stating that “Although after each shark incident the public remain vulnerable to media hype and the *Jaws* image, there is now a greater understanding and empathy for the animal that many still fear” (Francis 45). The Herren and Gallaher article also mentions this different aspect of media influence. The two note that despite the fictional illusion that the film *Jaws* and the media influence of it created for sharks, scientists have also conducted extensive research on these sea creatures and have brought about the two most prominent theories for why the majority of shark attacks have occurred. Herren and Gallaher list that “The first and most commonly cited is the theory of mistaken identity.” Which is the theory that sharks usually attack humans by mistake, most commonly mistaking swimmers and surfers to be a large fish

or a sea lion of sort. “The second theory is that of investigatory bites, which assumes that sharks usually attack humans out of curiosity.” To simplify, the sharks don’t know what a human is, so they bite them to figure it out (Herren 2). Now, many would find that incredible that society’s collective memory of sharks due to *Jaws* would create such a mirrored effect on people’s approach to them. However, Herren and Gallaher have concluded that the extensive research mentioned can actually be argued against, and that the aggressive behavior that some sharks exhibit is actually territorial, that “sharks do in fact reasonably identify humans as fellow predators and usually attack either out of defense, territorial protection, or competition for food, but not to prey upon humans” (Herren 2). It’s amazing that the devices that created the stigma that sharks are “monstrous creatures that indiscriminately kill and hunt humans down” have also inspired research to prove the near opposite, that sharks work like any other wild predator in the wild.

Conclusion

In the end, *Jaws* had become a landmark in history, and the individual memories of those who watched the film mixing with the media coverage, had all built upon the collective memory of how people viewed sharks in general. This ranged from how people feared them and the waters they dwelled in, to the increasing aggression towards sharks, to research being conducted on them to further understand them. The aspect of “living” memory, exemplified by my own mother, had helped understand the importance of the individual memory of those who experienced *Jaws* and the after effects of it. This of course was assisted by media itself, including the coverage of sharks and famous film with its advertisements. All of these combined helped structure the collective memory of *Jaws* and the sharks of real life.

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