

Kevin Reynolds

ENGL 220

Essay 2

Editing presents a great opportunity for filmmakers to construct their films in a variety of ways. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, the decisions made during the editing period help to “build the film’s overall form.” (218) In the case of Steven Spielberg’s 1975 blockbuster, *Jaws*, the editing serves as an integral part of its success. The precision of the cuts created by Spielberg and Editor Verna Fields have been studied and imitated many times over, but what cannot be replicated is the manner in which the editing guides the film’s narrative. Upon examining the iconic opening sequence of a lone skinny dipper being attack by a great white shark, it becomes apparent how the editing shapes every facet of the film. From its relationship with the music and actor performances to the suggested themes, the editing is the success of *Jaws*.

From the very opening of the film, Spielberg devises a close correlation of the editing and film score to create mood and tension. The transition from the opening title cards over black to the slow moving POV shot of the shark is emphasized by the building frenzy of cello and violin strings orchestrated by composer John Williams. The music swells with intensity as the shot continues without any indication of where the shark is going or what it’s after; this is deliberately planned to keep the audience in suspense. Verna Fields executes the first cut as the shark’s POV is situated behind a thick patch of seaweed, like a predator nestling in the bush waiting to pounce on its unknowing prey. The shot ends by the commanding presence of the screeching strings of the music, the sound of which is presented as possible foreshadowing of the

shark's carnage upon its helpless victims. The music does not suture the cut from the underwater POV shot to the beach where a party is taking place; instead, it emphasizes the cut's presence and makes it more noticeable to the audience. However, the addition of a harmonica being played by one of the partygoers at the beginning of the shot allows for a less awkward shift in location.

The cut from the POV shot of the shark to the kids on the beach establishes a strong contrast between the hunter and the hunted. For instance, the forward movement of the camera demonstrates the purposed nature of the shark; it is guided by instinct without any distraction through the cold, dark water below. However, the following shot of the kids on the beach presents them as frivolous and carefree, drinking, smoking dope and making out by the glowing warmth of the bonfire. Unlike the single-minded determination of the shark, the kids are sidelining responsibility by having a good time (this is reflected in the camerawork as well; the inaugural shot of this beach scene is literally a side tracking shot of the kids).

At the conclusion of this shot, the character of Tom Cassidy is introduced, and he is staring at someone or something off screen, unnoticeable to audience. This leads to the next cut within the scene, as the focus of the shot is now on young Chrissie Watkins; the placement and eyeline match of both characters within their respective shots indicate that Chrissie is the object of Tom's curiosity. The shot of their initial conversation from an elevated distance shows the fun and spirited party in the lower half of the screen, but resting above this jovial event is the ominous, uninviting ocean that is practically warning all to keep away; Fields utilizes this shot to indicate the horror that lingers over Chrissie.

The sexual themes of the film begin to manifest themselves as Tom runs after Chrissie across the dunes; a sequence of intercutting shots showcase the pursuit. This sequence maintains

a singular line of action throughout, but the shots vary going from wide shot to medium shot, depending on the character in focus. In this chase, Fields matches separate cuts of Tom and Chrissie as they remove their sweaters simultaneously, demonstrating the mutual eagerness of the characters for a sexual encounter. With the editing, Spielberg and Fields make a connection between male sexuality and the primal nature of the shark in its quest to satisfy its own appetite for flesh. As Chrissie completely strips naked and plunges herself into the glistening water, Fields cuts back to Tom stranded on the shore fully clothed; the notion being he has been rendered impotent. From that shot to the shot of a calm sea as Chrissie swims out in an arousing fashion, the film reinforces the lack of strong sexual activity on the part of Tom. Meanwhile, a POV shot of the shark is injected into the scene; the uninhibited movement of the camera as it follows Chrissie alerts the audience to the shark's intention to seek out and devour her. The shark as a metaphor for the dangers of sex becomes abundantly clear when Fields cuts from a shot of Chrissie bobbing blissfully out of the water immediately back to the POV shot of the shark quickly advancing on her directly below her legs. Although the shark is not shown in this sequence (a conscious editing decision on the part of Spielberg and Fields), the physical structure of a shark is somewhat phallic in its appearance.

As the unseen shark makes its initial attack on Chrissie beneath the surface, a frightening music stinger triggers the moment of Chrissie's awareness that something is horribly wrong. A sudden cut to a close up of Chrissie's petrified expression presents a complete dramatic shift in the tone of the scene; a seemingly harmless night swim has turned deadly. Prior to the attack, the editing consisted of several long takes, but now it becomes more aggressive and abrupt to reflect the situation of Chrissie is being viciously mauled before the audience's eyes. There are several cuts masked by the violent splashing of water across the front of the camera. The disorienting

sensation of the cuts also trigger a psychological and emotional unease within the audience, which allows them to experience the character's anxiety without the physical harm. Ironically, with the number of cuts and the amount of on-screen action, the 180 degree axis line is kept the same throughout the attack sequence; the proximity of the camera from the subject changes, but the film never changes the line of action.

Despite the seemingly inescapable terror of the shark attack, there is a moment where Fields returns the audience to the shore where Tom rests below an approaching sunrise; this brief transition from the chaos of Chrissie's attack to the tranquility of a rising sun is an incredibly striking contrast of life and death and how each stand at the threshold of one another. The moment of ease is quickly cast aside as the audience is returned to the horrific sight of Chrissie's demise before she is pulled down one last time into the jaws of her killer. Once Chrissie disappears, the scene once again retreats to the peaceful comfort of the morning light over the serene ocean where Chrissie Watkins died. The manner in which these contrasting images are edited help to illustrate the underlying threat that exists in Amity, but is blissfully ignored for the sake of protecting an image of peace and harmony.

The opening scene of *Jaws* demonstrates the power that editing holds over a film. The technical style interrelated with suggestive themes create a unique film experience that remains unparalleled in modern filmmaking.

Work Cited

Bordwell, D., Thompson, K. *Film Art: An Introduction*. Tenth Edition. *McGraw Hill*, 2013.