JAWS (1975)

A drunken swimmer ends up a midnight snack … and Jaws' iconic opening scene wastes no time demonstrating what Spielberg's film is about: the invisible and ruthlessly efficient killing machines that lay in wait for us 'out there', beyond the rule or reason of humans. In pitting Man against Shark, the film reflects the human drive to conquer adversity (or just … to conquer). Evading the shark isn't the only battle, however: the film contains an almost infinite number of conflicts – opposing or contrasting elements that create tension.

This tension drives plot and gives purpose to scenes and story (see Into the Woods by John Yorke for a fuller explanation). In Jaws, the big conflict is Life or Death – yet only around half the narrative is set in the water, and much less involves the shark directly. Instead, the film stokes dramatic tension through additional conflicts, many of which are not shark related at all.

Those who put business or self profit above the lives of others almost always end badly – in fiction, anyway. From The Towering Inferno to Jurassic Park, the love of money is the root of all evil. In Jaws, it's Mayor Larry Vaughn who lacks moral fibre. When Chief Brody wants to close the beaches to save lives, Vaughn – voicing the concerns of the business community – keeps them open. Such is his devotion to the dollar that Vaughn practically drums up business for the shark. "Why aren't you in the water?" he asks an old couple. "Please, get in the water." More precisely, it's Vaughn's desire to keep the beaches open that leads to the death of Alex Kintner (and, presumably Pippin the dog).

Dialogue, scenes and stories depend on conflict: opposing ideas or events that stand in the way of events running smoothly. Almost every film, play, opera and pop song you can think of uses conflict. As John Yorke explains, conflict is crucial to plot, and it happens in every scene and every line of dialogue. The greater the conflict, the more tension – and the greater the excitement. This lends itself to war movies or heist stories, but it's also what causes things to be funny, or sad.

There's an almost unbearable tension at the end of Jaws, when the conflict is between living and dying. But what makes the film so compelling are the battles which consume everyday people. This may also be why Jaws – which, after all is 'just' a monster movie – feels so much weightier than films that revisit the genre, including The Shallows, The Reef, 47 Meters Down and, er, Sharknado. Notably, all of these films spend more time in the water actively battling sharks – but without human dynamics and tensions, there's less reason to care who wins.

TheHaughtyCulturist. (2022, July 11). Jaws explained: why the shark isn't the film's only villain. Retrieved from The Haughty Culturist: https://www.thehaughtyculturist.com/films/jaws-film-spielberg-themes/

HALLOWEEN (1978)

Halloween has also been studied as a critique of American social values. Parents are unavailable during the duration of the film, unable to protect their children during the film's attacks. A bigger, related theme in Halloween is sex—namely, premarital sex and the thematic dangers of the act. Many of the film's murders take place in juxtaposition with sexual acts. The main characters find babysitting an opportunity to drink and engage in intercourse, during which each of them is killed. Even the film's introduction shows Michael Myers killing for the first time, murdering his sister after she was too busy having sex with her boyfriend to pay attention to him.

Carol J. Clover notes the slasher genre is fueled by a psychosexual fury, as the act of murder with a knife is sexual in nature. Projectile weapons never exist in slasher films, and murder by stabbing is widely considered an intimate means of dispatching someone. In Halloween, Laurie Strode is the one character not preoccupied by sex, and thus becomes the final girl that survives.

As AMC's FilmSite explores, "Halloween set in motion the Puritanical, psycho-pathological principle that one's survival was directly proportional to one's sexual experience. It also asserted the allegorical idea that sexual awakening often meant the literal 'death' of innocence (or oneself). With the title character Laurie, a virgin, she is able to escape mostly unscathed (as does the asexual Dr. Loomis and the young pre-teen Tommy Doyle), but others who are more promiscuous and sexually-charged are less fortunate and suffer deadly consequences as victims. In this film, murders often occur after sexual encounters when victims are distracted and off-guard."

Films like Halloween explore the dark side of suburbia, mocking the safety and sanctity people find in life outside a city environment. Michael Myers is a suburban child who murdered his sister, spent his developmental years in a mental asylum, and broke out to return to killing in his suburban hometown. He is a product of that environment. The bulk of slasher movies that follow Halloween take place in suburban settings, as it provides a shocking backdrop for this type of series of events.

A couple hundred thousand dollars, an innovative script, a darkly threatening musical score and a $2 William Shatner mask not only created a film that earned its place as a classic in cinematic history, but inspired scores of films that followed in its legacy. Halloween is a definitive piece of horror history, and its impact and legacy continue to bleed into new slaher titles each year.

The Take. (n.d.). What tropes and themes did "Halloween" help introduce to the horror genre? Retrieved from The Take: https://the-take.com/watch/what-tropes-and-themes-did-halloween-help-introduce-to-the-horror-genre#:~:text=Halloween%20has%20also%20been%20studied,thematic%20dangers%20of%20the%20act.

CARRIE (1976)

Carrie is a movie inspired by one of Stephen King's first novels, a dark story mixed with dramatic notes, where all the uncertainties and fears of adolescence, such as the problem of being different in a society that does not forgive, are transformed into anger and the desire for revenge.

The movie was directed by Brian De Palma in 1976, but I believe it is a timeless story; indeed there have been many remakes, the last one in 2013 by Kimberly Peirce, setting it in a modern context.

De Palma's film, which can be considered a cult classic, shows the daily life of teenagers at an American high school and explores the theme of bullying deeply, adding some gory scenes towards the end. Even if the themes of the movie are not new, they are seen through a different lens, and I think the greatness of the movie lies in the fact that we cannot really classify it into one unique genre.

One of the most interesting and meaningful scenes of the movie is when Carrie is discovered to have her period in the high school dressing room, without knowing what it is, as her mother never talked to her about menstruation. This scene addresses the mostly ignored societal taboo surrounding menstruation well.

In our still misogynist society the high cost of sanitary pads aren't generally questioned, and in developing countries it even prevents many girls from attending school. In fact, in most of these countries, due to the low sanitary standards, it is difficult for women to have a private and adequate management of their period. The scene not only signifies the journey from childhood to adolescence, but also symbolizes the taboo surrounding the subject.

Carrie makes us wonder who is the true monster of the story. Is it Carrie, who has exacted a bloody revenge after years of being taunted and bullied, or the society that labelled her as different, isolated her and made fun of her? Bullying is still a big issue in our modern era, especially for the fact that now, with new technologies, we have undergone a shift from real bullying to cyberbullying, where the victim has no way of escaping from the virtual prison of the net.
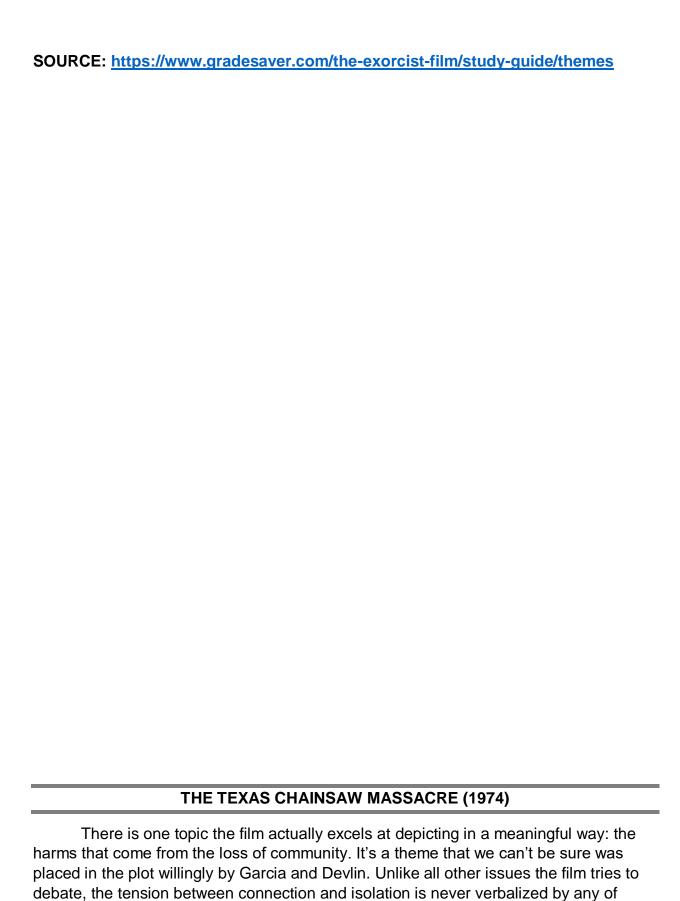
In the end, Carrie teaches us that, most of the time, there is an explanation for every bad action taken by someone, and both the bully and the victim have a story to tell. So instead of pointing fingers, we should think about how to help those people and how to prevent future tragic events from happening.

Arfini, L. (2016, June 6). CARRIE: On Bullying, Revenge And Female Taboos. Retrieved from Film Inquiry: https://www.filminquiry.com/carrie-1976-review/

THE EXORCIST (1973)

Almost exactly a year before the film was released to theaters, the Pope had famously commented upon the nature of evil by stating that "Evil is not merely an absence of something but an active force, a living, spiritual being that is perverted and that perverts others." This reaffirmation of the palpability of evil responded to what had become a rather strong tenet of 20th century belief which proposed that rather than existing as a tangible component of life, evil arose primarily as a result of the absence of good. By specifically choosing a child as the vessel to be possessed by demonic forces, The Exorcist almost at times seems to be acting in congress with Vatican doctrine with the implicit question: how could a child be responsible for such evil within the context of being an absence of good when children are the very icon of goodness and innocence? The answer, of course, is that she couldn't therefore the existence of evil within her must be a concrete demonic presence.

Two exorcisms take place here. One, obviously, is the exorcism of the demon from the young child. On a more abstract level, however, is the exorcism of Father Karras. Karras is plagued by increasing doubt which is engendered by personal guilt over being unable to provide proper care for his poor, dying mother. Unlike modern evangelical pastors preaching from inside mammoth modern arenas and living in splendor, Father Karras not only lives in poverty but is surrounded by poverty. It is inescapable and, more to the point, inexcusable from a theological perspective. The welcoming of the demon into himself for the purpose of a murder/suicide is the climax of the exorcism of doubt from inside Karras. Ironically, is the revelation of the tangible existence of the devil that finally exorcises the doubt still afflicting Karras about the existence and goodness of God.

Aesthetically, The Exorcist is one of the most liberal films ever made; not only did it break new ground in what could be portrayed in a mainstream, big-budget, studio produced film, it evaporated all existing borderlines. Ideologically, The Exorcist is conservative almost to the point of reactionary. In addition to a forthright insistence on the existence of evil in the tangible form of the presence of actual demons, the film also more subtly implies that these demons prey upon the breakdown of social conventions and institutes. Not only is Chris MacNeil divorced, but she is a working woman and not only is she a working woman, but she is a liberal Hollywood actress. So, in effect, her liberalism is the driving force behind the long periods of separation from her daughter which seem to have had the effect of first making her physically ill and then allowing that illness to reach a point that she becomes weak enough for the devil to possess her. Never stated, but implicitly stated is a potential moral: if she had been a proper housewife letting her husband bring home the bacon, she could have stayed home with her child and prevented Regan from being possessed. This theme is even more subtly intensified through the parallel with the family status of Father Karras. While it is true that his mother lives in poverty like himself and ultimately dies from a lack of access to affordable care, the sacrifice Karras makes is to God not himself and result in the ultimate sacrifice of killing himself so that he may do what Chris could not: save her daughter Regan.

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (1974)

There is one topic the film actually excels at depicting in a meaningful way: the harms that come from the loss of community. It's a theme that we can't be sure was placed in the plot willingly by Garcia and Devlin. Unlike all other issues the film tries to debate, the tension between connection and isolation is never verbalized by any of

Texas Chainsaw Massacre's characters. Nonetheless, it's a theme that is present in all the movie's storylines, from Melody (Sarah Yarkin) and Dante's (Jacob Latimore) business venture to Leatherface's (Mark Burnham) final homecoming.

When we first meet our protagonists, early on in the film, they are at a countryside gas station. A television is playing an ad for a true-crime documentary about the eponymous massacre that took place in that very part of Texas in the mid-1970s. Lila (Elsie Fisher) strikes up a conversation with the cashier and is interrupted by her older sister, Melody, who was waiting in the car with her business partner, Dante, and his fiancée, Ruth (Nell Hudson). When the two sisters leave the convenience store, the cashier mumbles to himself the word "gentryfuckers". A short while later, the crew is stopped by a police officer on the side of the road, and we learn that Melody and Dante are young chefs who are moving to the abandoned town of Harlow to start a new, ambitious business that will change the local landscape entirely.

Much like Lila, Sally enters Texas Chainsaw Massacre as a loner that has lost the people she most held dear in one unexpected, traumatizing event. In the blink of an eye, the small community she had built with her friends was gone. Sally's own survivor's guilt is what drove her to isolation and to go looking for meaning in the only thing she has left: revenge.

This theme of isolation, of being the only one left behind after everyone else is gone, pervades all the Texas Chainsaw Massacre's central plots, as does the harms that come from the loss of community. Mrs. Mc and Leatherface, as well as Richter, are leftovers in a ghost town, isolated voices that are easy targets for banks and investors trying to take what's theirs. Leatherface is the last "child" in a now empty orphanage, and the movie implies that he gave up on his murderous ways after finding solace in Mrs. Mc's home: he appears alongside other children in an old photograph; Mrs. Mc talks about changing troubled boys with compassion and understanding; and Leatherface does seem to care deeply about his foster mother. It's the loss of this last bit of connection to this small community that drives him to become Leatherface once more. In a way, his journey mirror's that of Lila, who, by the end of the movie, is sent back into the world completely alone. While Lila returns to her father, the only family she has left, Leatherface goes back to his childhood home, looking for the only community he had before the orphanage: his deeply disturbed and disturbing family.

The theme of community also pops up when we discuss Dante and Melody's plans for Harlow, and not just through Lila's trauma. Feeling isolated and threatened by the dangers of the big city, the pair of chefs is looking for a place to start a new life, surrounded by like-minded people. They are, as Ruth puts it, "idealistic individuals who want to build a better world". However, this new world of theirs comes not from a desire to create something concrete, but from sheer denial. Ruth, Melody, and Dante are simply trying to run away, to shut off all the issues present in society from their small

world. Throw in a bottle of Kool-Aid and Richter has a point: they are making a cult. But what do people look for in cults if not community?

A community is defined as a group of people brought together by one thing in common, whether it's living in the same place or simply sharing a love for a specific TV show. Being part of a community is essential for human life: it's how we build our support systems, how we find our places in the world, and how we stay in touch with reality. Isolation and the loss of community ties lead to depression, suicide, and upticks in violence. After all, when we lose touch with the people that surround us, it becomes easy to dehumanize them and to lose our own sense of identity. Likewise, when left to fend for ourselves, we become easy prey for much stronger forces. Sometimes, these forces are the inability to cope with trauma that keeps us trapped in the past and turns us into a shadow of our former selves, much like Sally, and sometimes, they are the financial interests behind gentrification that force people out of their homes. And, sometimes still, they are our own murderous instincts and an old chainsaw calling from behind the wall.

SOURCE: https://collider.com/texas-chainsaw-massacre-loss-community-horrors-explained-netflix/#:~:text=Texas%20Chainsaw%20Massacre%20tries%20to,from%20the%20loss%20of%20community.