



From *Jaws* to *Baby Shark*: an overview of 50 years of sharks in cinema and television

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Sharks are remarkable creatures that have captured human imagination since remote times, being part of ancient lore, mythology and religion (e.g. Baughman, 1948; Mojetta et al., 2018; Khan Da Silva, 2023). Fifty years has pass since the premiere of *Jaws* in 1975, and the goal of this work is to review the impact of this film on cinema and television and on sharks themselves.

A PRIMER ON SHARKS

The fossil record of Chondrichthyans (the cartilaginous fish group including sharks, rays and chimaeras) is ancient, probably originating in the Late Ordovician to Silurian Period (458 to 419 million years ago), and with indubitable record since the Devonian Period (419 million years ago), with shark-like fish like *Cladoselache* (e.g. Benton, 2005). The Subclass Elasmobranchii (i.e. the group that includes all living sharks and rays) dates from the Early Jurassic (252 million years ago; Nelson et al., 2016). There are 34 extant families of sharks, with more than 100 genera and circa 510 known species included in the Division Selachii (Nelson et al., 2016).

Extant sharks are characterized by a flexible cartilaginous skeleton, a fusiform body covered with minuscule denticle-like scales, five to seven paired gill slits, a size range from less than 20 centimetres (the dwarf

lanternshark *Etmopterus perryi*) to more than 12 meters (the whale shark *Rhincodon typus*), internal fertilization, and being either oviparous, ovoviviparous or viviparous. Despite some species living in freshwater, most sharks are marine, inhabiting diverse environments from the sea-bottom to the open ocean, and from tropical waters to the freezing seas of high latitudes (Capetta, 1987; Nelson et al., 2016).

JAWS AND SHARKSPLOITATION FILMS

The image of sharks in pop culture is immediately associated to the film *Jaws* (1975) directed by Steven Spielberg, which is an adaptation of Peter Benchley's first novel of the same title, published in 1974. In both novel and film, a great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) terrorizes a small coastal village.

Despite *Jaws* not being the first movie about killer sharks (see for example *Killer Shark*, 1950; *The Sharkfighters*, 1956; and *Shark*, 1969), it was a major success, grossing 477 million US\$ worldwide and initiating the sharksploitation subgenre within exploitation films. Furthermore, *Jaws* was responsible for the renewed interest in 'monster movies' during the late 70s, 80s and 90s (De Fez, 2007), in which instead of the giant monsters of the 50s (e.g. *Gojira*, 1953), the danger were real animals, like in



Figure 1. Movie poster of *Jaws* (top left) and posters of several film inspired by it. Source: IMDb (www.imdb.com).

the movies *Orca* (1977), *Piranha* (1978), *Prophecy* (1979), *Alligator* (1980), and *Cujo* (1983).

Vivarelli (2022) analysed the poster art of *Jaws*, work of Roger Kastel, which reflects the horror, tension and helplessness of the victims. The ‘J’ in the title suggests a fishing hook, and the ‘W’ reminds the viewer of the

sharp teeth of a shark. This poster was replicated in almost all subsequent films about sharks or other aquatic creatures (Fig. 1).

By the end of the 90s, the interest in shark films was almost gone (Fig. 2), but *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), with a decent budget and great cast, was well received by both the public and critics, probably being partly

responsible for the rise in sharksploitation films in the 2000s, which shifted from a maximum of 1 or 2 films per year to a minimum of 3 or 4 per year. The rise of animals in horror films in general by the 2000s has been linked to the implementation of CGI in horror films (Rasia, 2020).

Low budget films like *2-Headed Shark Attack* (2012), *Sharknado* (2013), and *Ghost Shark* (2013) unlocked a new dimension of the sharksploitation subgenre, given that the image of the shark was no longer terrifying, but funny. The number of films per

year raised drastically, reaching thirteen films in 2015 alone (Fig. 2).

In most of sharksploitation movies, the image of sharks as apex predators is the premise of the film, but there are many films that exploit fantastic (e.g. *Sand Shark*, 2011; *Snow Shark*, 2011; *Avalanche Sharks*, 2014) or supernatural (e.g. *Zombie Shark*, 2015; *Shark Exorcist*, 2015; *Ouija Shark*, 2020) aspects. There are even science fiction approaches to sharksploitation, like the shark-octopus hybrid from *Sharktopus* (2010), humanoid sharks (e.g. *Creature*, 1998; *Hammer-*

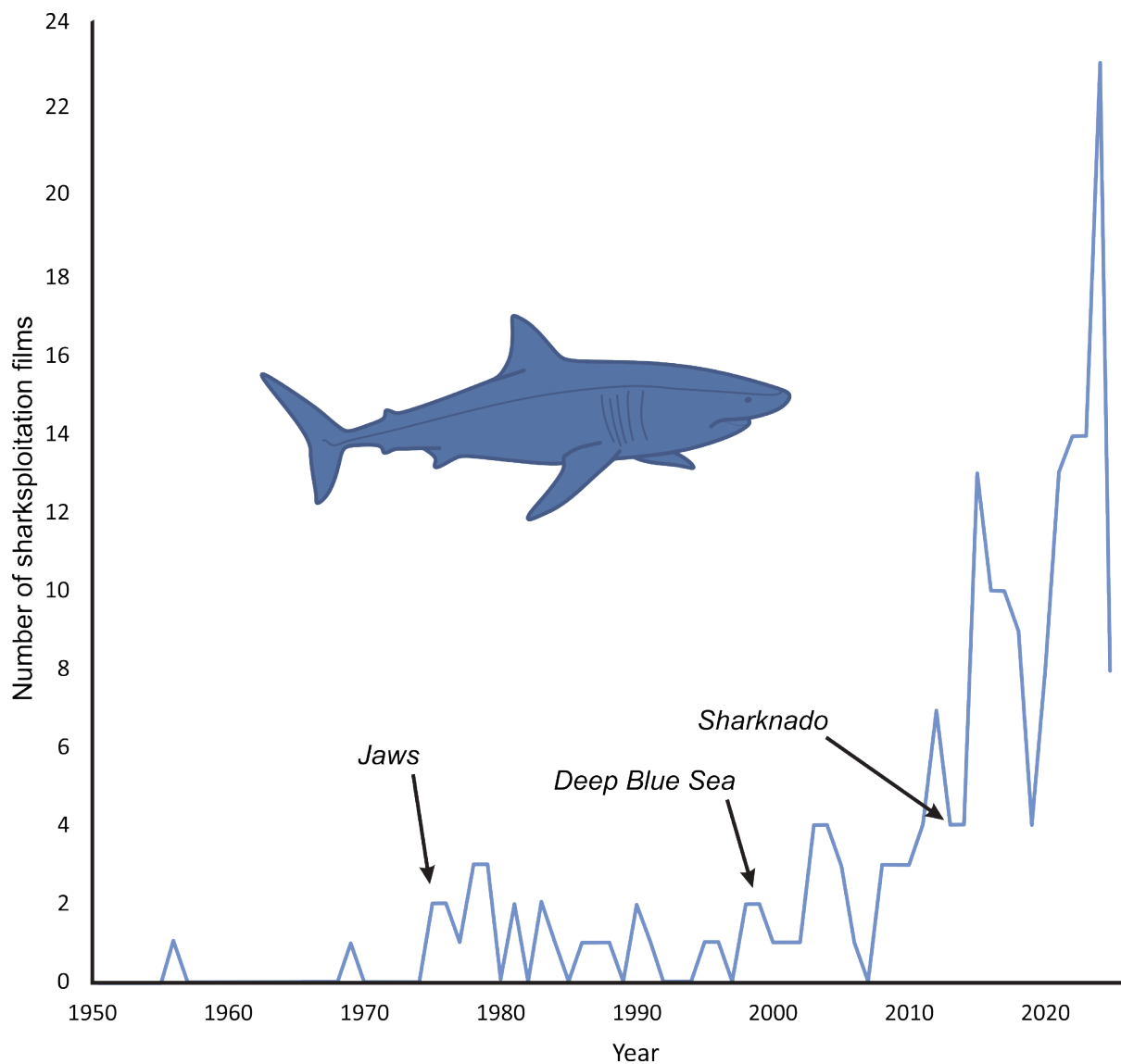


Figure 2. Bivariate graph showing number of sharksploitation films per year, including only films about killer sharks (i.e. excluding documentaries, animated movies, short films or romance/dramas with sharks not being the central figure); see full list in the Appendix.

head, 2005; *Shark Side of the Moon*, 2022) or robot sharks (e.g. *Mega Shark Vs. Mecha Shark*, 2014; *Roboshark*, 2015). So, the themes for sharksploitation seem to be endless.

There are a few shark films that are really interesting from a cinematic point of view or in the building of suspense, like *Jaws* (1975), *Open Water* (2003), and *The Reef* (2010). In addition, from the more than a hundred of sharksploitation films, *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), *Sharknado* (2013), *Ghost Shark* (2013), *The Shallows* (2016), *47 Meters Down* (2017), *Deep Blue Sea 3* (2020), and *Sous la Seine* (2024) are worthy of mention given their originality or genius use of low budget productions.

Many films feature the megalodon (*Otodus megalodon*), the largest known extinct shark, like *Megalodon* (2004), *The Meg* (2018), *Megalodon* (2018), *Megalodon Rising* (2021), and *The Meg 2: The Trench* (2023) to name a few; but the vast diversity of extinct sharks (Cappetta, 1987), including several giant

species (e.g. *Otodus chubutensis*, *Carcharodon plicatilis*, *Cretoxyrhina mantelli*), or bizarre spiked/horned sharks (e.g. *Cladoselache*, *Stethacanthus*, *Hybodus*) remains virtually unexplored by sharksploitation films.

The image of sharks has been used successfully in many movies that are not strictly about sharks, like James Bond films or the Italian zombie cult film *Zombi 2* (1979; aka *Zombie Flesh Eaters*), with a beautifully filmed underwater fight scene between a real shark and a zombie.

The fascination for sharks (or the exploitation of them) also reached the documentary genre, in many cases leaving behind any scientific accuracy and aiming straight for sensationalism (e.g. *Blue Water, White Death*, 1971; *Great White Serial Killer*, 2013, 2022, 2024). There are even some documentaries analysing sharks in cinema (e.g. *The Shark is Still Working: The impact & legacy of "Jaws"*, 2009; *Sharksploitation*, 2023).



Figure 3. Sharks in cartoons and animated films. *Jabberjaw* (top left), *Finding Nemo* (top right), *The Sharks* (bottom left) and *nerd shark* (bottom right) from *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Sources: respectively, Wikimedia Commons, Heroes Wiki (www.heroes.fandom.com), Encyclopedia SpongeBobia (www.spongebob.fandom.com).

CARTOON CHARACTERS AND MISCELLANEOUS

The funny side of sharks has been widely used in cartoons since the release of *Jaws*. Among the first and better remembered cartoon characters is Jabberjaw, from the eponymous Hanna-Barbera TV show aired from 1976 to 1978 (Fig. 3).

There are many shark characters in the TV show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (aired since 1999), some of which portray sharks as tough, like the dance gang The Sharks (episode 'Sharks vs Pods'; Fig. 3), while others are shy, like the shark nerd (first appearing in episode 'Musclebob Buffpants'; Fig. 3). The great white shark Bruce from *Finding Nemo* (2003) and his sidekicks, Anchor the great hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*) and Chum the shortfin mako shark (*Isurus oxyrinchus*), have decided to stop eating fish, in an effort to reverse the bad reputation of sharks (Fig. 3). The whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) Destiny from *Finding Dory* (2016) is a friendly character, though this is not surprising, given that whale sharks are filter feeders, like baleen whales. Other cartoon characters include *TigerSharks* (1987), *Sharky & George* (1990–1992), Sharky the sharkdog from *Eek! The Cat* (1992–1997), *Street Sharks* (1994–1997), *Kenny the Shark* (2003–2005), *Zig & Sharko* (2010–present).

Moreover, sharks went viral with the children's song "Baby Shark", which dates back to the 20th century but was popularized in 2016 by the South Korean company Pinkfong with a YouTube video. In 2017, a stuffed toy shark called Blåhaj (literally "blue shark"), sold by IKEA, became an icon for the transgender community and trans rights (Milner, 2022). Recently, some humanoid shark characters have been in central roles in movies, like King Shark (a 1994 comic book character from DC Comics) from *The Suicide Squad* (2021) and Shark from *The Bad Guys* (2022).

LESS FAMOUS SHARK RELATIVES

Batoidea is a group of fish closely related to sharks (Selachii). It includes rays, skates and sawfish (Nelson et al., 2016). Even though some species can pose some danger to humans in some very specific circumstances (e.g. the death of the crocodile hunter Steve Irwin by a stingray), there are only two movies about killer rays, *The Sea Bat* (1930) and *The Sea Fiend* (1935), the latter reedited almost 10 years later as *Devil Monster* (1946; Fig. 4). In the already mentioned film *Finding Nemo*, a spotted eagle ray (*Aetobatus narinari*) is the schoolteacher of the reef (Fig. 4). Peter Benchley, author of *Jaws*,

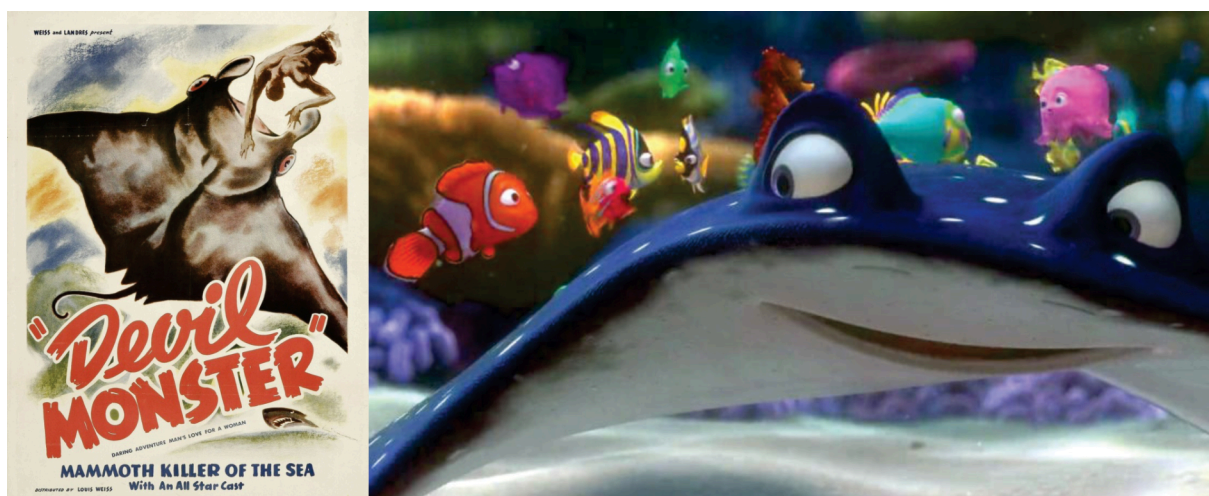


Figure 4. Rays in films. Movie poster for *Devil Monster* (left) and scene from *Finding Nemo* (right). Sources: respectively, IMDb (www.imdb.com), *Finding Nemo*.

wrote the dramatic novel *The Girl of the Sea of Cortez* (1982), with a manta ray (*Mobula birostris*) as an important character.

IMPACTS ON SHARK BIODIVERSITY AND CONSERVATION

It was argued that horror films have an impact in the public opinion about certain animals (e.g. Rasia, 2020; Riyaz, 2022). After the success of *Jaws*, shark hunters and shark fishing tournaments became very popular (Choi, 2010; Francis, 2012; McGuire, 2023).

As one of the top ocean predators, and given their ecological diversity, sharks play an important role connecting food webs across habitats, helping to ensure balance in the ocean's ecosystems. With increased demand and exploitation rates for some shark species and shark products, a concern has grown regarding the status of many shark stocks and their exploitation in global fisheries. Several biological factors (relatively slow growth, late sexual maturity, and few young per brood) make many shark species particularly vulnerable to overfishing, since they are captured in directed (including "finning", the slicing of fins and discarding the rest of the body) and non-directed fisheries as bycatch. Sharks present many challenges for conservation and management given a general lack of data reporting on their catch (Dulvy et al., 2017; NOAA Fisheries, 2024).

In addition, recent studies warn on the potential negative effects (noise pollution, food web disturbance, vertical migration disruption, respiratory distress, and bioluminescence interference) of deep-sea mining in sharks and rays, by disturbance of the seafloor and water column (Judah et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, in the past decade there has been a change in the public perspective, from "protect humans from sharks" to "protect sharks from humans", leading to a rising concern in shark conservation (Simpfendorfer et al., 2011; Dulvy et al., 2017).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Very little have changed in fifty years of sharksplotation, since the premiere of *Jaws*. Despite some recent films like *Sous la Seine* and *Deep Blue Sea 3* warning about the effects of climate change and pollution, most of the movies about sharks rely on old formulas of sharksplotation. Taking into account the grim present situation of shark biodiversity and conservation, it would be a great opportunity for the movie industry (including fiction and documentaries) to reverse the negative image of sharks, and start to raise public awareness about the vulnerability of these ill-reputed animals and the importance of preserving them.

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Dr Luciano L. Rasia is a palaeontologist working on the evolutionary biology of caviomorph rodents, including extinct giant rodents. He is a horror and science fiction enthusiast, both in cinema and literature.

APPENDIX

List of sharksploitation films used in Figure 2.

1. Killer Shark (1950)
2. The Sharkfighters (1956)
3. Shark (1969)
4. Jaws (1975)
5. Sharks' Treasure (1975)
6. Mako: The Jaws of Death (1976)
7. Shark Kill (1976)
8. Tintorera: Killer Shark (1977)
9. Cyclone (1978)
10. Jaws 2 (1978)
11. Cave of the Sharks (1978)
12. Up From the Depths (1979)
13. The Shark Hunter (1979)
14. Beyond the Reef (1979)
15. The Last Shark (1981)
16. Great White Death (1981)
17. Jaws 3-D (1983)
18. The Desert (1983)
19. DevilFish (1984)
20. Shark's Paradise (1986)
21. Jaws: The Revenge (1987)
22. Night of the Sharks (1988)
23. Furia Asesina (1990)
24. Deep Blood (1990)
25. Mission of the Sharks: The Sage of the U.S.S. Indianapolis (1991)
26. Cruel Jaws (1995)
27. Aatank (1996)
28. Great White (1998)
29. Creature (1998)
30. Shark Attack (1999)
31. Deep Blue Sea (1999)
32. Shark Attack 2 (2000)
33. Shark Hunter (2001)
34. Shark Attack 3: Megalodon (2002)
35. Open Water (2003)
36. Red Water (2003)
37. Shark Zone (2003)
38. Dark Waters (2003)
39. Megalodon (2004)
40. Shark Attack in the Mediterranean (2004)
41. Blue Demon (2004)
42. 12 Days of Terror (2004)
43. Spring Break Shark Attack (2005)
44. Raging Sharks (2005)
45. Hammerhead (2005)
46. Open Water 2: Adrift (2006)
47. Sharks in Venice (2008)
48. Marina Monster (2008)
49. Shark Swarm (2008)
50. Malibu Shark Attack (2009)
51. Psycho Shark (2009)
52. Mega Shark Vs. Giant Octopus (2009)
53. Mega Shark Vs. Crocosaurus (2010)
54. The Reef (2010)
55. Sharktopus (2010)
56. Shark Night 3D (2011)
57. Sand Sharks (2011)
58. Snow Shark: Ancient Snow Beast (2011)
59. Super Shark (2011)
60. Bait (2012)
61. 2-Headed Shark Attack (2012)
62. Jurassic Shark (2012)
63. Jersey Shore Shark Attack (2012)
64. Dark Tide (2012)
65. Jaws of the Shark (2012)
66. Shark Week (2012)
67. Avalanche Sharks (2012)
68. Sharknado (2013)
69. Ghost Shark (2013)
70. La Leyenda del Megalodón (2013)
71. Hai-Alarm Am Müggelsee (2013)
72. Piranha Sharks (2014)
73. Mega Shark Vs. Mecha Shark (2014)
74. Sharknado 2: The Second One (2014)
75. Sharktopus Vs. Pteracuda (2014)
76. Ghost Shark 2: Urban Jaws (2015)
77. Sharknado 3: Oh hell No! (2015)
78. Zombie Shark (2015)
79. Roboshark (2015)
80. 3-Headed Shark Attack (2015)
81. Raiders of the Lost Shark (2015)
82. 90210 Shark Attack (2015)
83. Mega Shark Vs. Kolossus (2015)
84. Shark Killer (2015)
85. Sharkansas Women's Prison Massacre (2015)
86. Shark Lake (2015)
87. Shark Exorcist (2015)
88. Sharktopus Vs. Whalewolf (2015)
89. The Shallows (2016)
90. Ice Sharks (2016)
91. Ozark Sharks (2016)
92. Planet of the Sharks (2016)

93. USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage (2016)
94. Sharkenstein (2016)
95. Dam Sharks! (2016)
96. Sharknado 4: The 4th Awakens (2016)
97. Saltwater (2016)
98. Atomic Shark (2016)
99. 47 Meters Down (2017)
100. Mississippi River Sharks (2017)
101. Empire of the Sharks (2017)
102. Toxic Shark (2017)
103. Sharknado 5: Global Swarming (2017)
104. Cage Dive (2017)
105. Trailer Park Shark (2017)
106. Land Shark (2017)
107. House Shark (2017)
108. 5-Headed Shark Attack (2017)
109. The Meg (2018)
110. Megalodon (2018)
111. Deep Blue Sea 2 (2018)
112. The Last Sharknado: It's About Time (2018)
113. Nightmare Shark (2018)
114. Santa Jaws (2018)
115. 6-Headed Shark Attack (2018)
116. Frenzy (2018)
117. Post Apocalyptic Commando Shark (2018)
118. Snow Monster Vs. Ice Shark (2019)
119. 47 Meters Down: Uncaged (2019)
120. Capsized: Blood in the Water (2019)
121. Bad CGI Sharks (2019)
122. Shark Encounters of the Third Kind (2020)
123. Ouija Shark (2020)
124. Amityville Island (2020)
125. Shark Season (2020)
126. Sky Sharks (2020)
127. Land Shark (2020)
128. Deep Blue Sea 3 (2020)
129. Horror Shark (2020)
130. Jurassic Shark 2: Aquapocalypse (2021)
131. Virus Shark (2021)
132. Noah's Shark (2021)
133. Sharks of the Corn (2021)
134. Great White (2021)
135. Swim (2021)
136. Megalodon Rising (2021)
137. Huge Shark (2021)
138. Killer Shark (2021)
139. Apex Predators (2021)
140. Mako (2021)
141. Shark Huntress (2021)
142. Bigfoot Vs Megalodon (2021)
143. Bull Shark (2022)
144. Blood in the Water (2022)
145. Shark Bait (2022)
146. Sharkula (2022)
147. The Reef: Stalked (2022)
148. Doll Shark (2022)
149. Shark Waters (2022)
150. Maneater (2022)
151. Beneath the Surface (2022)
152. Ouija Shark 2 (2022)
153. The Requin (2022)
154. The Year of the Shark (2022)
155. Jaws Vs. Kraken (2022)
156. Shark Side of the Moon (2022)
157. Ninja Vs. Shark (2023)
158. Puppet Shark (2023)
159. Jurassic Shark 3: Seavenge (2023)
160. The Black Demon (2023)
161. Big Shark (2023)
162. Cocaine Shark (2023)
163. The Meg 2: The Trench (2023)
164. Blind Waters (2023)
165. Megalodon: The Frenzy (2023)
166. Deep Fear (2023)
167. Red Light District Shark Attack (2023)
168. Amityville Shark House (2023)
169. Chum! (2023)
170. Shark Evil (2023)
171. Under Paris (2024)
172. No Way Up (2024)
173. Shark Exorcist 2: Unholy Waters (2024)
174. The Last Breath (2024)
175. Something in the Water (2024)
176. HotSpring Shark Attack (2024)
177. Mountain Shark (2024)
178. Mummy Shark (2024)
179. Nanoshark (2024)
180. Megalodon Returns (2024)
181. Apex Predators 2: The Spawning (2024)
182. Shark Island (2024)
183. Bull Shark 2 (2024)
184. Bull Shark 3 (2024)
185. Space Sharks (2024)
186. Shark Girl (2024)
187. Graveyard Shark (2024)
188. Shark Warning (2024)

189. Kaiju Glam Metal Shark Attack (2024)

190. Fear Below (2024)

191. Game of Shark (2024)

192. Tsunami Sharks (2024)

193. Camp Blood: Clown Shark (2024)

194. Into the Deep (2025)

195. Lone Star Shark (2025)

196. Lone Star Shark 2 (2025)

197. Lone Star Shark 3 (2025)

198. Dangerous Animals (2025)

199. Beast of War (2025)

200. Bikini Shark (2025)

201. Great White Waters (2025)