Introduction

Hollywood Remaking

“There are three things we know about the movies,” Hannah Ewens wrote on VICE.com in March 2016. “One: Hollywood will franchise anything if it made money. Two: Hollywood does not like new things. New is scary—new writers, female directors, black directors, scripts, ad infinitum. Three (and this is possibly the most important): Remakes and sequels are never very good.” Ewens’s article “Why Hollywood’s Obsession with Remakes and Sequels Needs to Die” directly responded to news that Hollywood was working on a sequel to Tim Burton’s 1988 horror comedy Beetlejuice. For Ewens, this was reason to take a stand against the industry’s practice (or, what she provocatively calls “Hollywood’s hubris”) of creating follow-ups to cult classics. Her conviction was that Hollywood must change its business model if the undisturbed afterlife of “untouchable originals” is to be ensured. The piece is representative of contemporary attitudes among popular film critics toward movies that repeat, continue, revise, and expand an already familiar story. Writing for the Los Angeles Times, Justin Chang similarly vented his discontent about the fact that most of 2016’s summer movies were derived from preexisting material. While bashing blockbusters like Independence Day: Resurgence (Roland Emmerich, 2016), Ben-Hur (Timur Bekmambetov, 2016), and Ghostbusters: Answer
the Call (Paul Feig, 2016), Chang, however, remained keenly aware that “the only thing more tedious and predictable than sequels, remakes and reboots is a critic who complains about sequels, remakes and reboots.”⁴

Such witty displays of outrage, frustration, and disappointment have indeed become a cliché in popular film criticism, a performance in and of itself that pits Hollywood’s industrial imperatives against concepts of art, creativity, and originality. In fact, critics frequently suggest that cinema as an art form—invariably associated with the singularity of supposedly original, self-contained films that make a pretense of transcending their commercial nature—is on the verge of falling victim to Hollywood’s love affair with the franchise, to the market potential of sequel-izable tentpoles, and to an all-encompassing logic of remaking. Tropes of death and destruction often permeate such assessments in popular film criticism to illustrate the pernicious effects of twice-told tales on Hollywood’s cinematic output, on audiences, and on the cultural legacy of classic movies. Some critics have predicted that Hollywood’s preference for brands and reluctance to invest in new ideas will eventually cause “the death of the great American art form.”⁵ Chang worried in 2016 that “for the regular moviegoer, this season’s steady IV drip of sequelitis and overall multiplex mediocrity seemed to usher in a kind of slow spiritual death.”⁶ And Ewens, who describes Hollywood remaking as “destructive regurgitation” that deliberately risks “bastardizing a legacy with a follow-up” in the name of box-office success, was anxious about protecting long-dead “originals.”⁷ She believed that since these classics were already “preserved . . . in our collective cultural history for the rest of time, on film studies syllabuses everywhere,” there was no point in reviving them as soulless, zombie-like versions of their former formidable selves.⁸

Taken together, these examples encapsulate current concerns about Hollywood remaking in popular film criticism, but they also put the spotlight on much of what is fascinating about the practice: industry trends, discursive constructions, cinematic formats, and audience appeal as it relates to both cultural memory and generational attachments to popular culture texts. These intersecting topics are at the center of this book, which seeks to challenge the categorical dismissal of Hollywood remaking in popular film criticism and, to some extent, in academic film studies by examining it as a meaningful and meaning-making cultural and industrial
activity. What are the political implications of an all-female team of paranormal exterminators in the 2016 *Ghostbusters* movie? What does it mean to bring back the chariot-racing Bible epic *Ben-Hur* as a spectacle-laden action picture, or to continue *Independence Day* with a follow-up that once more hinges on the premise of an alien invasion threatening to obliterate humanity? These new versions are surely movies of and for their times, and yet they can never exist in isolation from what has come before them. They always hint back at the past, deriving their own commercial value, cultural legitimacy, and audience appeal from the retrospective relations to their respective predecessors. That these recent films invoke the memory of past renditions and conjure their aura is, in fact, the selling point and cultural capital of the new *Ghostbusters*, *Ben-Hur*, and *Independence Day: Resurgence*.

But—and herein lies the bone of contention for popular film criticism—remaking is never “a one-way process: a movement from authenticity to imitation, from the superior self-identity of the original to the debased resemblance of the copy.” Remaking also transforms the meanings, pop-cultural afterlives, and legacies of earlier films; and this reciprocity, in turn, triggers nostalgia for an unchanged and unchangeable past, fomenting fears that the past might be rendered moot and superseded by the present. In this regard, remakes and sequels appear to threaten a broader sense of self that was once forged in relation to the movies’ predecessors. For the vast majority of popular film critics, remaking seems to register as an unwelcome irritation because it flaunts the fundamental instability of narratives—including those of the self. The underlying paradox is, of course, that remaking enables such “recognitions” (to evoke Rita Felski’s meaning of the term) in the first place and that the perceived instability ultimately translates into an enduring repertoire of shared media texts that play a formative role in the shaping of selfhood as well as in the construction and maintenance of communal coherence.

The complexities of remaking are routinely being obscured by current debates about the film industry’s waning creativity and commercial imperatives. Hollywood’s long history of making and remaking films, however, hints at long-term meaning-making processes that affect how people understand (and remember) themselves and the world in which they live in relation to the popular culture products they have come to know and
love. Past attitudes toward Hollywood’s penchant for recycling its properties have little in common with the overwhelming discontent that radiates from today’s film reviews and journalistic think pieces, and remaking certainly never had the “deadly” effects that Justin Chang and Hannah Ewens describe. On the contrary, the reliance on familiar formulas not only ensured many film studios’ continued existence in times of crisis but was also instrumental in preserving stories; in creating cinema’s formal, stylistic, and generic conventions; in shaping memories and lived experiences; and in encouraging cinephilia and enduring fandoms. Rather than ushering in death, remaking has proven to extend the lives of studios, narratives, and even film as an art form through a self-perpetuating combination of repetition and renewal.

With these ideas in mind, *Hollywood Remaking* is intended as an intervention into widespread popular and academic assumptions about remaking that echo Chang’s and Ewens’s sentiments. It offers a detailed account of remaking’s persistent presence in Hollywood cinema that is undergirded with historical statistics, industry perspectives, and popular and academic perceptions of the practice, as well as discussions of intertextuality, cultural memory, and generation theory. The aim is not to endorse Hollywood remaking but to theorize it and to complicate our understanding of a constantly evolving commercial practice that intersects with creative processes of cultural production, shifting sets of cultural values, and complex negotiations of identity. Looking beyond the general sense of annoyance at ever more remakes and sequels coming out of Hollywood, then, this book critically examines what these films *do*.

“REMAKING” AND “HOLLYWOOD” IN HOLLYWOOD REMAKING

*Remaking* is used both as a concept and a shorthand in this book. As a concept, remaking stands for a *medium-specific process of innovative reproduction that creates new economic and cultural value from already existing properties and that is imagined, discursively constructed, and defined by stakeholders from production and reception contexts*. Remaking is a historically dynamic process with shifting operating principles,
cultural meanings, and communicative functions. As a shorthand, *remaking* never exclusively refers to the production of film remakes in the more restricted sense of the term (i.e., movies based on previous movies). Instead, remaking, as conceptualized here, describes a process that generates different cinematic formats by repeating, modifying, and continuing past renditions in the present. These remaking formats include film remakes proper as well as series, sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and crossovers that rely on familiar source material and already established fictional worlds in order to sustain or reboot film franchises. This is crucial because cinema’s preference for repetition with a difference, for telling familiar stories as new stories, for combining the comfort of the already-seen with the thrill of the unexpected has never been reduced to film remakes alone but constitutes a much more wide-ranging phenomenon. While not doing away with cinema’s well- and lesser-known categories—after all, labels like *remake*, *sequel*, or *prequel* serve to group films with similar characteristics and to activate audience expectations—this approach draws attention to the fact that boundaries are fluid and that clear distinctions between remaking formats continue to dissolve in today’s media environment. The focus on just one format would limit the epistemological scope of this book, whereas a broader understanding opens productive new pathways and offers a more comprehensive (and possibly more adequate) perspective for investigating remaking’s historically evolving commercial, narrative, and cultural meanings.\(^\text{11}\)

It seems important to stress that the focus is exclusively on Hollywood cinema; more precisely: this book only examines *Hollywood films based on Hollywood films*. Although the combination of “Hollywood” and “remaking” immediately conjures up ideas of globalization, transnational flows, and cultural imperialism, the emphasis here is expressly not on Hollywood remakes of foreign films. Such transnational film remakes are exciting objects of study in their own right and have long dominated the research that is undertaken in the field of remake studies.\(^\text{12}\) However, the business of transnational film remakes generally depends on quickly producing culturally adapted and, in the case of Hollywood, often streamlined, globally marketable English-language versions, whereas remaking follows entirely different rules within the context of national cinemas (including the US cinema that Hollywood produces). I have therefore
proposed the distinction between *diachronic remaking* and *synchronic remaking* in order to adequately engage with the social function of Hollywood remaking as a mode of timekeeping and catalyst for generational identification.\(^\text{13}\) *Diachronic remaking* describes the repeated, regular recycling of the same popular storytelling material over many decades, usually within the same national context, and *synchronic remaking* refers to the production of another, usually foreign-language, version shortly after the release of a movie. Put simply, movies that are remade time and again in the same national context *already have a past* in that national context and therefore raise other issues than transnational film remakes. Hollywood remakes of world cinema—including the French comedy *Trois hommes et un couffin* (Coline Serreau, 1985) / *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987), the Dutch thriller *Spoorloos* (George Sluizer, 1988) / *The Vanishing* (George Sluizer, 1993), J-horror like *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) / *The Ring* (2002, Gore Verbinsky), the Hong Kong thriller *Infernal Affairs* (Andrew Lau / Alan Mak, 2002) / *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006), and Nordic Noir like *Man som hatar kvinnor* (Michael Nyqvist, 2009) / *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, 2011)—pose pertinent questions about processes of cultural translation and global power dynamics. By contrast, the movies that are at the center of *Hollywood Remaking* unfold their stories over time: on the diegetic level as well as on a more abstract level of imagined collectivization, where they come to form part of *cultural memory*.

The negotiation of memory in popular culture (and film in particular) is not dependent on more or less contested representations of national traumas or historical events. Rather, popular fictional stories and characters that are not explicitly tied to a national past can, through transgenerational repetition, become elements of collectively shared experiences and thus store, circulate, and transmit cultural memories that help maintain what Benedict Anderson has called the “imagined community” of the nation.\(^\text{14}\) If, as Marita Sturken writes, “cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation” in which a nation’s “collective desires, needs, and self-definition . . . are simultaneously established, questioned, and refigured,” remaking certainly partakes in such processes.\(^\text{15}\) US cinema is, of course, both a national and a global force: Hollywood dominates the global media entertainment market, and its films are therefore bound to shape
the memories and lived experiences not only of domestic viewers but of audiences living outside the United States as well. Questions concerning the global flow of cinematic texts and the underlying economic, aesthetic, cultural, and political implications that drive much of the scholarship on transnational film remakes are consequently, if not the main concern, nonetheless relevant for this book, and the theory that I develop around a broad, complex, and historically evolving concept of Hollywood remaking necessarily extends beyond the national framework of the United States.

Following Mette Hjort’s idea of thematic “aboutness,” Ulf Hedetoft has convincingly argued that Hollywood produces a national cinema “whose taken-for-granted assumptions and common sense understandings (and occasionally explicit ideological or philosophical loyalties) are of a US origin, no matter how strongly they might parade as global plots, themes or ideas, or how effectively ‘American’ problems are frequently given an all-human, universalistic spin.” At the same time, the global consumption of Hollywood movies challenges notions of a US national cinema that can be boiled down to a fixed set of attributes and instead reframes it as an ongoing process of cultural negotiation and meaning-making in different national and local contexts.

As Arjun Appadurai reminds us, the flow of Hollywood movies in a global cultural economy does not automatically transform them into a destabilizing force of Americanization and cultural homogenization, but offers “new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds.” Accumulated, long-term memories as well as sentimental attachments to certain movies, characters, storyworlds, and stars are key components in the “work of the imagination” that Appadurai describes. While my primary focus is on the production and reception of Hollywood remakes, series, sequels, and long-running film franchises within the United States and on how the movies’ “aboutness” is managed in successive iterations, cultural memory is a crucial tool in order to probe how remaking operates both on the national stage and in a global mediascape.

My central aim is to come to terms with Hollywood remaking, to take it seriously not despite but precisely because of its commercial impulses and undeniable success with audiences, to recognize its complexity and explore the cultural work it performs. When Iain Robert Smith and Constantine Verevis call out “the Hollywood-centrism of film remake scholarship,” they
have a point where transnational remakes are concerned. Comparative analyses of Hollywood remakes based on foreign films overwhelmingly dominate the work that is being done in this field, often distracting from other trajectories and remaking traditions. It is, however, misleading to think that the “Hollywood-centrism” Smith and Verevis identify for the scholarly research on transnational film remakes translates into substantiated knowledge about Hollywood’s long-standing practice of recycling its own properties. “Little has been written about film remakes,” Michael B. Druxman remarked in 1975. Almost fifty years later, his statement still rings true when it comes to comprehensive analyses of Hollywood remaking.

It seems odd that there should still be such a research gap. Among the relatively small number of monographs and articles that exclusively focus on Hollywood, only a few provide historical accounts, and, if they do, they are not necessarily examining the cultural work of different remaking formats, or they leave key questions unanswered. How has remaking developed as a commercial practice? By what strategies and patterns has it been managed and institutionalized? How is the actual number of Hollywood’s remaking output related to the evolving media-ecological conditions of the film industry? To what extent have historical production trends informed the discursive constructions of remaking in the cultural arena? Has remaking always been imagined to be the destructive force today’s critics claim it to be? What kinds of negotiations does it entail when popular narratives unfold over time? What is the extent of remaking’s critical potential? How does the practice engage in processing social, political, and cultural change? How are remakes and sequels shaped by cinema’s shifting affordances? How do these movies convey film-historical knowledge? How do they become active in the formation of generations? How do they perform cultural remembrance work? This book theorizes Hollywood remaking as a unique (and uniquely overlooked) industrial practice of cultural reproduction that perpetually generates, sustains, and renews popular media texts, whose enduring economic and cultural relevance adds up to more than Hollywood’s deeply ingrained profit principle. I argue that these movies actively shape how the film industry, cinema, and audiences imagine themselves as they constantly negotiate past and present, stability and change through a serial dynamic of repetition and variation.
HOLLYWOOD REMAKING AND SERIALITY

Without doubt, Hollywood remaking—broadly conceptualized as an industrially driven, yet creative and culturally relevant process of innovative reproduction based on tried-and-proven material from the popular storytelling repertoire—has been and continues to be first and foremost a commercial endeavor. This observation seems shockingly obvious and yet it hardly distinguishes remakes and sequels from any other form of commercial mass entertainment in capitalist market cultures. Unlike their ostensibly more original and artistic cinematic counterparts, though, remaking’s derivative movies lead a highly conspicuous commercial existence in the cultural imagination. In contrast to standalone films that claim to miraculously escape their economic conditions, remakes and sequels unapologetically appear as “undisguised commodities.” Because remaking always creates “multiplicities,” to borrow a productive term from Amanda Ann Klein and R. Barton Palmer, it constantly challenges culturally valued ideas of closure and self-containment and draws attention to the profit-driven business model of the film industry, which is interested in the endless generation of more movies and, hence, more money. Remaking is diametrically opposed to any claims to textual singularity and instead serves as the motor of ongoing film production. For, despite the fact that films might have initially been produced as self-contained works of art in the traditional sense, their narrative closure can always be undone, their stories reactivated by a remake or a sequel. Hollywood remaking, then, is an inherently commercial practice that shapes the past, present, and future of individual movies, which, lined up in a decades-spanning remaking chain, eventually operate as serialized narratives.

If seriality depends on the dialectical tension between repetition and variation and involves the task of creating something new by reproducing something already familiar with a difference, as Umberto Eco suggests, Hollywood remaking can certainly be considered a serial storytelling practice. To be sure, remaking follows a possibly more haphazard, definitely slower-paced, and generally longer-lived dynamics of repetition and variation than more explicitly serialized formats in other popular media. However, even though they are not released on regular daily or weekly schedules like serial narratives in newspapers or on radio and television,
remakes and sequels still exhibit similar serial strategies and storytelling techniques—from episodic structures and progressing story arcs to recurrent characters and delayed narrative closure. The long, drawn-out, much less predictable serial rhythm of such films, meanwhile, affects the cultural work that remaking performs (and may explain why it has been overlooked by popular film critics and scholars for so long). Instead of offering soothing everyday routines that can counterbalance the exhausting acceleration and fragmentation of modern life, as daily cartoons, soap operas, and even complex television series are bound to do, remaking formats operate on a larger temporal scale: they structure the passage of time over many years and decades by providing economic, aesthetic, and cultural reference points that are relevant for how the film business, the medium, and, indeed, people come to recognize and position themselves within a longer historical trajectory.28

Seriality opens up a long-term perspective on the cultural work of remakes, series, sequels, and film franchises. It helps to understand how movies are connected to each other and paves the way for productive inquiries into how Hollywood remaking impacts the industry, shapes cinematic codes and conventions, and how it encourages generational identification and imagined collectivization. The strong emphasis on continuity this entails does not only—and not even necessarily—play out on the level of plot, yet it always extends beyond the sustained storyworlds and narratives that unfold on-screen. Hollywood remaking hence fulfills an orienting function because it structures time outside the fictions it presents—in economic, aesthetic, and cultural terms. Economically speaking, cinematic iterations derived from one or more already existing movies mark historical production trends and the marketability associated with certain narratives, stars, and remaking formats at a specific moment in Hollywood history. In the course of the last century, uncertainties and crises in the film industry have often occasioned the studios’ recourse to presold properties as a way to reduce production time and costs and because the familiarity of already-existing material promises built-in audiences for new releases. Preferences for the remake, the sequel, or other formats of recycling have never remained stable so that the films emerging from Hollywood’s remaking trends become legible as historical records of the many shifts and changes cinema has undergone.
in a constantly evolving media environment. The aesthetic of these films, meanwhile, forms part of a similarly time-bound framework and structures the development of cinema’s medium-specific affordances (and limitations) as well as its representational standards. By remaking popular films, Hollywood essentially supports an evolutionary view of cinema as it not only repeats, continues, expands, and revises familiar stories but also inscribes a larger narrative of technological and cultural progress into successive film versions.

It is in this sense that “remaking operates as a method of cinematic self-historicization”29: individual follow-ups in a remaking chain demarcate distinct periods in film history (such as the silent and sound film era) and draw attention to cinema’s prevailing visual regimes and their related technological and cultural configurations. Frank Kelleter and I have suggested that “cinema writes its own history with remakes, sequels, or prequels . . . within the evolving network of expectations, recognitions, allusions, variations, and reinterpretations that makes these iterations possible and keeps them in circulation.”30 This process necessarily involves on-screen negotiations of accepted norms and values that are embedded in changing cultural, social, and political contexts. Over time, remaking underlines both the persistence and malleability of dominant ideologies and the recurrent urge to process them in familiar scenarios. But remaking is not only intricately linked to Hollywood’s economic and aesthetic history. It is also always documenting ongoing cultural debates that are inevitably inscribed, erased, and overwritten in the already-seen. Repetition (of themes, plots, and successful formulas) provides the canvas for negotiating change while it simultaneously reinforces an overall sense of continuity that helps stabilize the imagined community; that is, remaking enables communicative practices that strengthen feelings of togetherness, of belonging to one and the same collective.31

Underlying my approach is an acknowledgment that remaking produces serial texts—regardless of whether they are called remakes or sequels, or any other name. These films are never unconnected; they are serialized—sometimes only retrospectively, but always at what Frank Kelleter and I have termed “a higher level of cinematic self-observation.”32 This has two important methodological consequences for the study of Hollywood remaking. First, the peculiar seriality remaking creates suggests that what
Kelleter writes about popular series also applies to the remaking formats at the center of Hollywood Remaking: they “are appropriately described as active cultural institutions that consist not just of the stories they tell but also of the manifold proceedings and forces that are gathered in their acts of storytelling.” These movies can be understood as self-observing systems with agency of their own. More precisely, remakes and sequels are parts of larger actor-networks; they belong to assemblages of individuals, institutions, technologies, and objects that shape Hollywood remaking, even enable its existence as an industrial and cultural practice in the first place. The movies in question tend to display an acute awareness of their status as remaking formats and actively participate in their own discursive constructions. Consequently, to study Hollywood remaking as a larger historical phenomenon means to trace the processes that bring such assemblages into being. In order “to reconstruct how shifting positions of commercial ‘production’ and ‘reception’ are created, maintained, and complicated through historically specific (i.e., evolving) practices of pop-cultural self-description and self-performance,” I examine a variety of different materials ranging from movies to paratexts, trade papers to fan magazines, popular film criticism to scholarly works.

The movies self-reflexively negotiate the formal and narrative possibilities of remaking, which, in turn, depend as much on the content, form, and cultural meanings of earlier renditions as they depend on cinema’s technological affordances, media-ecological conditions, and the place of Hollywood remaking in the cultural imagination at a given moment in film history. Paratexts such as press kits, promotional material, trailers, and posters, as well as interviews with filmmakers, producers, and actors belonging to the production context suggest how these films want to be watched, thereby shaping their pop-cultural circulation and the ways in which remaking can be imagined. While trade papers like Variety, Film Daily, and Hollywood Reporter primarily engage in assessing the commercial value and strategic logic of Hollywood remaking, these industry publications also coin much of the vocabulary used to discuss remaking and, hence, partake in its discursive institutionalization. Fan magazines such as Photoplay or Modern Screen play an important part in providing cinemagoers with an interpretative framework for understanding the film industry and the products it creates as well as in cultivating audience