

Kathleen Loock, **Hollywood Remaking: How Film Remakes, Sequels, and Franchises Shape Industry and Culture**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024, 320 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

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In his review of the latest iteration of *Snow White*, Justin Chang (2025) called out Disney for its ongoing “cynical, self-cannibalizing” live action remaking project. Chang decried the remakes’ “maddening artistic timidity,” which “has gone hand in hand with a shifty political opportunism, marked by half-hearted representational milestones” (para. 11). In ***Hollywood Remaking: How Film Remakes, Sequels, and Franchises Shape Industry and Culture***, Kathleen Loock sees past such critical hand wringing over contemporary Hollywood reproduction. She insists, instead, that film remaking—a term Loock uses as a catch-all for remakes, series, sequels, etc.—is, and has always been, “a meaningful and meaning-making cultural and industrial activity” (pp. 2–3). The steady combination of repetition and variance in Hollywood has sustained the film business through technological and industrial transformations, extended the lives of narrative and generic forms, and consecrated commercial film as an art form for over a century. Through rigorous theoretical analysis and historical case studies, *Hollywood Remaking* offers film industry historians new insights into culture industry practices, processes that shape cultural memory, and the formation of national and generational identities.



*Hollywood Remaking* makes use of a large-scale statistical survey of films, undertaken by the author, that charts historical remaking trends. This empirical evidence, presented in a number of useful visualizations, demonstrates that despite contemporary critical and academic discourse, the 21st century does not represent the height of Hollywood remaking. Far from it, in fact. The heyday of all remaking forms was actually the 1940s, when remakes accounted for 26% of all annual U.S. productions over the decade. Compare that to just 7% on average since 1990 (p. 16).

Loock’s statistical rebuttal to the dominant critical understanding of contemporary remaking represents perhaps the book’s most important intervention. But she does not stop there. Utilizing the macro-level view of Hollywood production trends, Loock effectively ties evolutions in remaking forms to moments of technological and industrial rupture. For example, sequels grew in prominence during the late 1970s and 1980s with the proliferation of home entertainment formats like cable television, VHS, and, eventually, DVD. This sort of industrial and technological analysis at the outset lays the groundwork for Part I’s theoretical discussion.

Loock reviews earlier scholars' textual and taxonomic approaches to remaking, arguing that these have constructed an unproductive binary of pure and singular "original" texts vs. referential and derivative "remakes." This conceptualization obscures Hollywood narratives' always-in-progress quality, where earlier films are actively reshaped and reinterpreted with each remake or sequel produced. Loock rejects the original/remake binary for the more productive theoretical understanding of Hollywood remaking based on seriality. When viewed as *serialized* texts, films and their remakes (and sequels, prequels, and spin-offs) can be conceptualized as open, ongoing, and complex narratives that are continually struggled over by audiences and producers. Loock points to seriality's associations with mass production and consumer culture to explain the overwhelmingly negative critical response to Hollywood remaking.

With seriality established as her primary theoretical framework, Loock seeks to conceptualize what cultural functions remaking serves. She argues that Hollywood's industrial reproduction offers (American) audiences a "usable past" in two important ways. First, "serial patterns of repetition and variation construct, preserve, and challenge the cinematic past" (p. 67), encouraging audiences to imagine Hollywood (and popular culture) as marching inexorably forward through technological and cultural progress. Second, remaking provides ongoing cinematic touch points that audiences use to conceptualize their own personal identities within a broader national cultural memory. This process creates what Loock calls "movie generations." These are generational identities shaped by different iterations or installments of film series and franchises. For example, the release of 2016's reboot *Ghostbusters: Answer the Call* created the opportunity for older and younger audiences to (re)discover and reframe earlier *Ghostbusters* movies (pp. 90–92). Whether or not a viewer is even a fan of *Ghostbusters* (1984) or its reboot, the films themselves and the popular discourses surrounding them are inextricably associated with contemporary industrial, technological, aesthetic, social, and cultural norms. Thus, through constant Hollywood remaking, audiences mark passing time while also situating themselves among other generational cohorts.

Loock moves on to historical analysis in Parts II and III. Highlighting so-called talker remakes like the 1937 version of *Stella Dallas* (a remake of the 1925 silent film), Loock argues that new sound iterations foregrounded continuity in narrative while highlighting newness in technology (p. 129). From an industrial perspective, the reuse of popular intellectual property was an obvious strategy to mitigate the risks of sound conversion, and Loock effectively cites trade discourse to underscore this. Words that popped up in the press like "exhume" and "reborn" presented an image of dark studio vaults filled with the dead remains of silent films rediscovered and reanimated by sound (p. 114). But besides creating commercial value, talker remakes put new technologies, fashions, and stars on display; and, in doing so, these films underscored modernity's progress. This notion of progress was further taken up in promotional materials for talker remakes ("What change hath time and talkies wrought!" [p. 129]), constructing a cinematic (silent) past and a distinct (modern) cinematic present.

With the transition to sound completed, remakes were supplanted by film series, which presented familiar characters in episodic narratives, as the dominant remaking format in the late 1930s and 1940s. Film series were almost always B-movies produced cheaply and quickly by the major studios making use of their long-term contracted casts and crew. Series—often western, detective, or action films—built loyal fan bases that were virtually guaranteed to fill theaters for each new installment. But with 1948's *Paramount Decree* ushering in the end of the majors' monopolistic distribution and exhibition practices—not to mention

the rise of television—came the decline of the classical studio era (p. 173). Without guaranteed distribution, the majors stopped financing B-level films and shifted focus entirely to the production of large spectacles. These were often Biblical or historical epics that did not lend themselves well to seriality, thus the episodic film series ceased to be the dominant remaking form during the 1950s.

With some important exceptions like the James Bond series, the post-studio era saw a reduction in Hollywood remaking overall. But beginning in the 1970s, with increasing conglomeration of the major film studios and the rise of blockbuster filmmaking, sequels became the most prominent remaking form. Sequels during this time were generally unplanned but opportunistic productions meant to capitalize on proven popular characters while reducing risk in the high-stakes blockbuster gamble. Then, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, strategically planned franchising set in as Hollywood's industrial logic sought to exploit synergies across the divisions of metastasizing, horizontally integrated media conglomerates. Through both "sequelitis" and then "franchise fever," Looock tracks increasingly hostile critical reaction to remaking in the New and Conglomerate Hollywood eras. These criticisms position serialization—whether sequel or franchise installment—as a blow to Hollywood originality. But Looock sees it differently, arguing that audiences derive serial pleasures from ongoing relationships with characters and storyworlds.

Looock approaches a criticism of remaking by highlighting the "forever franchise," best exemplified by the Star Wars films. Rather than rebooting or restarting storyworlds, which provides the opportunity for injection of aesthetic and cultural novelty, Looock asserts that forever franchises chiefly foreground character continuity over many generations and are thus always nostalgic. But she falls short of identifying these films as inherently culturally conservative, which may have set up a forceful critique of Hollywood's current franchise fixation. Looock is not ultimately interested in adding her own voice to the collective criticism of Hollywood remaking, however. Rather, she provides a prompt for readers: "The question remains whether the need to preserve memories and sentimental attachments leaves enough room to process social, cultural, and political change and to meaningfully negotiate progressive and conservative ideologies" (p. 220).

Many would argue that this question is easily answered with a resounding no; Hollywood's nostalgia does not leave any room for real negotiation of ideologies beyond the narrow centrist path of liberalism. If we accept this to be true, then we can bypass questions of "progressive" versus "conservative" ideologies in Hollywood films—whether remake, adaptation, or original—and, instead, turn to more fundamental questions raised by *Hollywood Remaking*. These might include: How has material investment in remaking as a proportion of overall budgetary and marketing spending by studios changed over time? What does Hollywood's continued obsession with remaking mean for how industry practitioners—above and below the line—understand their creativity and their work? How does ongoing serialization as a Hollywood logic impact nonstudio stakeholders like exhibitors? And, perhaps most important, how can we meaningfully account for (and determine) cinematic quality while studying and analyzing remaking? Hopefully, remaking studies, film studies, and media industry studies scholars will begin to answer the questions raised here. Doing so will help us better understand the complex tension between industrial standardization and creativity that—as Looock has demonstrated—is, and has always been, at the heart of the Hollywood culture industry.

### **Reference**

Chang, J. (2025, March 22). Disney's *Snow White* remake whistles but doesn't work. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-current-cinema/disneys-snow-white-remake-whistles-but-doesnt-work>