Are Remakes Doing as Well as Originals? A Note[*]

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Abstract

This paper compares originals and remakes from the standpoint of artistic quality and financial return. It appears that on average remakes are of lower quality and have smaller financial returns than originals.

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1. Introduction

Remakes are new versions of older films,[1] produced by a succession of different directors (such as John Huston's 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon*, a remake of Del Ruth's 1931 *Maltese Falcon* and Dieterle's 1936 *Satan Met a Lady*) or by the same director (such as Hitchcock's 1956 *The Man Who Knew too Much*, a remake of his own 1934 version). We compare remakes with originals and raise two questions. Are they "better" than the originals on which they are based? Are they financially more successful than the originals?

We use ratings given by two well-known movie critics (the American Maltin and the French Tulard) to assess quality, and box office data to measure financial success.

In this note, we give some evidence that, on average, remakes are of lesser quality and have smaller returns than originals. But then, why are they produced? Here are some reasons.

(a) Bazin (1951) suggests that "when the success of a movie was large enough to be remembered, producers do not redistribute it, they remake it." Unlike for many other forms of art, time does not always increase the value of a movie. Cinematographic techniques age, the film itself fades out, mute films fall out of fashion, special effects and sound effects become unconvincing and obsolete, etc. so that a remake gives a fresh view.

(b) Ideological, social or political elements can be the rationale for reworking a previously filmed plot.[2] Remakes address different social demands as is clear from the following examples. In the French movie *Trois Hommes et un Couffin*, one of the three characters fools a police officer, and returns a suspicious parcel containing drugs to the drug dealer. In Nimoy's American remake *Three Men and a Baby*, the three characters unite with the police and fool the criminal drug dealers who end up being jailed. In *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux*, Boudu is a metaphorical, symbolic and unreal character. The remake *Down and Out Beverly Hills* makes this into a comedy. *Boudu* is "a classic attack on complacency", while Beverly Hills is "a slick, often funny, but unusually obvious satire" (Maltin, 2003). Another example of such ideological changes is given by Williams (2002, p. 156-157), who compares Clouzot's *Corbeau* (1943) and Preminger's *Thirteenth Letter* (1951) in which a "philosophical drama of basically social issues has been substituted [to] a drama of almost purely individual choices…there are no second chances at tough decisions."

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[1] Note that Protopopoff (1989) suggests defining three types of remakes: (a) those that are inspired by a movie; (b) those that are inspired by a movie and another work; (c) those that are inspired by a work that is not a movie.

[2] See also Harney (2002, p. 78),

(c) There are reasons to believe that remakes are produced to keep production costs down, and according to Forrest and Koos (2002, p. 4) and to Grindstaff (2002, p. 282), Hollywood producers tend to prefer canned to risky projects.

(d) However, aesthetic motives should not be excluded: "Even the cheapest movies cost a lot of money compared with such other media as…painting's canvas and paint" (Harney, 2002, p. 78), and "in order to turn a profit, the remaker must also believe that the particular narrative in question is still compelling and thus worth retelling" (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 302).

(e) Remaking may be, like in other forms of art, in particular in painting and sculpture, "a valid way of learning and was probably essential for the transformation of the films" (Spehr, 1985, cited by Forrest, 2002, p. 114).

All these arguments give a rather defensive, sometimes, negative, view of why remakes are produced.[3] After all, copying is an activity that is probably as old as art itself, and there is no reason for movies not to follow the same pattern. Contrary to the prediction made by Walter Benjamin (1971), copies do not destroy the aura of the original, but contribute to its value. A work that does not inspire copies is a dead work, but originality is obviously more risky, as is observed even by philosophers: "The great artist has dared to risk failure in order to reveal a new aspect of the universe for us."[4]

3. A Simple Statistical Analysis

Basic Data

Using Forrest and Koos (2002) and Wiederhold (2003) we collected 228 movies that were remade, their ratings by the well-known American movie critic Maltin (2003) and by Tulard (1997), a French critic, as well as the rentals (to proxy box office[5]) given in Reynolds (1995) and Sarkett (1996). For all these pairs, country and year of production are available,[6] as well as an indicator of closeness of scenarios between original and remake, provided by

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[3] In this context, it is worth citing Daniel Herbert (*Film International* 24, p. 70) in his review of Verevis (2005) "Since the beginnings of cinema, innumerable discussions have cited remakes as symptoms of crass commercialism, a dearth of creativity or, in the case of Hollywood remakes of foreign films cultural imperialism.

[4] See Meyer (1983).

[5] What is usually called box office is very often represented by rentals, that is the amount of money paid by movie theatres to producers and distributors to show a film. Rentals paid to distributors are typically worth about half of gross proceeds, but the fraction is usually smaller for well-known producers or distributors and higher for others.

[6] Though some mistakes had to be corrected, using Maltin (2003).

Wiederhold (2003).[7] Remakes produced before 1950 were not taken into account, and the database contains no remakes produced after 1999.

Using the ratings of two experts only (a French and an American) may be criticized as not being representative of "quality." Here we are not so much interested in absolute quality ratings, which differ across experts, but in differences between the rating of an original and its remake by each of the experts who, given their nationality and sensitivities, are likely to have different opinions about the absolute level of quality. As will be seen, however, they both share the same opinion about relative ratings, and we do not think that adding more opinions and looking at average relative ratings would be adding very much.

Comparing Ratings of Originals and Remakes

Ratings by Maltin and Tulard were available for 201 and 98 movie pairs for which both the original (O) and a remake (R) exist. Maltin rates 26 (out of 201) remakes as being better than originals, 31 as being equivalent, and 145 as being of lower quality. The three numbers are 22 (out of 98), 29, and 47 for Tulard. Table 1 gives the results of a series of tests aimed at comparing average ratings on pairs for various subsets: nationality, year of production, time elapsed between the production of the original and the remake, closeness of scenario. The table includes for each subset the number of pairs on which the test is run (N), the means for originals (O) and remakes (R), the resulting t-value of a test {H_0: the two means are equal} and the correlation between the ratings of originals and remakes (C).[8]

Here are some facts that are worth to point out: (a) In general, the quality of remakes judged both by Maltin and by Tulard is significantly lower than the quality of originals; (b) The quality of American remakes is not significantly different from the French originals, at least according to Maltin. Tulard's judgment is that remakes are of lesser quality; (c) American remakes of American originals have a Maltin- and a Tulard-rating that is slightly

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[7] Closeness is measured by a number that may vary between some small but positive value (remake far from original, say a nod by De Palma to Hitchcock) and 1 (perfect copy). We did not take into account remakes for which the distance to the original was smaller than 0.8.

[8] We also ran regressions (using ordinary least squares and ordered probits (which needed changing the scaling, since negative values and non integer values are not allowed) of the differences in ratings between remake and original on the various variables (mostly dummies) described in Table 1 and on their interactions. In all cases, the only regression coefficient that was significantly different from zero at the 5 percent probability level was the intercept term, whose sign was always negative (which implies that, on average, remakes pick a lower rating than originals). No other coefficient was significantly different from zero at the 10 percent level, implying that this negative average result holds for all subsets: no subset does any better or worse than the average. The results are thus identical to those shown in Table 1, which, we think, are easier to interpret than those resulting from a regression.

worse than the global mean rating, and their quality is significantly worse than that of originals; (d) Remakes of originals that were produced no later than 1950 have larger Maltin- and Tulard-ratings than those that were produced after 1950, and Maltin attributes larger ratings to the originals as well, though the difference (not given in the table) is not significantly different from 0; (e) Remakes that were produced between 1950 and 1980 also have larger Maltin-ratings than those that were produced after 1980, though the difference (not given in the table) is not significantly different from 0; (f) Time elapsed between the production of the original and the remake does not seem to matter; (g) Closeness between original and remake does not seem to matter either; (h) Most correlations of ratings between originals and remakes are positive (which implies that the quality of the remake is positively related to the quality of the original) but very small, and the correlation coefficients are not significantly different from zero in most cases.

Comparing Box Office Successes of Originals and Remakes

Box office data are more difficult to retrieve, since they are available only for movies that made more than one million dollars in current prices.[9] This is especially unfortunate for older movies (and some in our database were produced back in the 1920s), since this was an amount that few movies reached during those early years. The second difficulty with box office data is that they are available in current prices and not in number of tickets. Deflating hardly helps, since over time, global attendance numbers have undergone cycles, especially in the early 1930s and during World War II, and original and remake are not necessarily part of the same cycle. The introduction of television and later on of tapes, CDs and derivative products also considerably changed the market of moviegoers. Therefore, instead of trying to take into account all these factors, we represent the economic success of each movie in our sample by the ratio of its box office to the one of the movie produced (or released) during the same year, and that was the fifth largest box office hit.[10] The success of a movie is thus represented by a percentage with respect to the fifth largest box office realized during that year. To simplify, we keep calling these numbers "box office."

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[9] The basic data come from Reynolds (1995) and Sarkett (1996). They essentially cover the North-American market.

[10] A median box office number would obviously be a better choice. The reason for choosing the fifth largest box office is that Sarkett (1996) provides only the five movies with the largest box office. Note that the fifth largest box office is the median of the nine largest. Results in which we took the largest box office as a benchmark lead to similar conclusions.

The number of movies for which this percentage could be computed is unfortunately quite small. We could retrieve data for 119 original movies and 142 remakes. The pairs (O-R) for which data are complete is even much smaller (37 movies).

Table 2 is therefore much less elaborate than Table 1. It gives two types of results. The first two lines compare the mean box offices for originals and remakes, some of which are (O-R) pairs, but most are not. The results show that for the two cases in which the comparisons make sense, originals do better, and significantly so, than remakes, according to the usual t-test. The comparisons made on couples point in the same direction. However, given the small number of observations (37), we use a nonparametric median test[11] which leads to a computed χ^2 value of 28.62, ruling out the equality of medians in both groups (O and R) at a probability level that is much lower than 0.001. Originals seem to perform significantly better than remakes.

4. Conclusions

The main conclusion one can get from this simple and straightforward analysis is that remakes do worse in terms of quality *and* in terms of box office. The first conclusion is not surprising, the second is more so, but is consistent with the heavy tails in the distribution of returns on movies that is so much stressed by De Vany and Walls (1999) and De Vany (2006), and leads us to conjecture that producers invest in remakes in the same way as they invest in sequels, hoping for a hit, or at least for a positive revenue. What Terry Press, the marketing chief of DreamWorks, writes about prequels and sequels ("when you have a title people recognize, part of your battle is already won") applies probably to remakes as well.[12]

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[11] See Siegel (1956, pp. 111 and ff.)
[12] Davin Gordon, Back to the Future, *Newsweek*, November 6, 2006, p. 62.

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Table 1
Mean Ratings of Originals and Remakes by Maltin and Tulard,
t-tests and Correlations of Ratings Between Originals and Remakes

		Maltin					Tulard			
		Mean rating					Mean rating			
	N	R	O	t-test	C	N	R	O	t-test	C
All	201	2.41	3.19	10.48[*]	0.08	98	1.72	2.34	3.67[*]	0.08
By nationality										
French (0) to US (R)	20	2.70	3.03	1.43	-0.12	9	1.00	2.33	2.67[*]	-0.25
UK (0) to US (R)	12	2.83	3.29	1.92	0.46	4	-	-	-	-
US (0) to US (R)	148	2.36	3.19	9.72[*]	0.03	70	1.71	2.36	3.20[*]	0.23
US (0) to non-US (R)	16	2.53	3.13	2.61[*]	0.38	6	-	-	-	-
US (0) to UK (R)	7	-	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-
By year of production										
Orig. no later than 1950	98	2.57	3.28	6.79[*]	-0.07	58	1.84	2.29	2.01[*]	0.09
Orig. after 1950	103	2.27	3.11	8.14[*]	0.18	40	1.55	2.40	3.36[*]	0.09
Remake no later than 1980	99	2.51	3.21	5.94[*]	-0.08	55	1.80	2.29	2.18[*]	-0.04
Remake after 1980	102	2.32	3.18	9.35[*]	0.19	43	1.63	2.40	3.04[*]	0.26
By time elapsed between O and R										
Age difference ≤ 20	90	2.38	3.07	5.95[*]	0.14	36	1.78	2.19	1.54	-0.05
Age difference > 20	111	2.44	3.30	8.84[*]	0.03	62	1.69	2.42	3.39[*]	0.16
By closeness between O and R										
Fract. < 0.90	99	2.44	3.17	6.67[*]	0.20	39	1.87	2.23	1.34	0.18
Fract. ≥ 0.90	102	2.39	3.22	8.10[*]	-0.04	59	1.63	2.41	3.62[*]	0.04

Notes. No statistics are given for cases in which the number of pairs is smaller than 10.
N = number of pairs; R = mean rating remakes; O = mean rating originals; t-test = value of the t-variable test for equality of means ([*] indicates that equality of means is rejected at the 5% probability level); C = correlation coefficient.

Table 2
Mean Box Offices of Originals and Remakes

	Remakes		Originals		
	N	Mean	N	Mean	Equality-test
All	142	0.586	119	1.089	3.15[*]
US produced	131	0.612	108	1.142	3.07[*]
Couples	37	0.335	37	1.269	28.62[**]

N = number of observations; equality-test : [*] = t-test for equality of means is rejected at the 1% probability level; [**] χ^2 non-parametric equality of medians test: equality of medians is rejected at a less than 1% probability level..