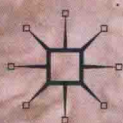


film trilogies

new critical approaches

edited by claire perkins
and constantine verevis



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Edited by

Claire Perkins

Assistant Lecturer, Monash University, Australia

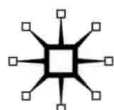
and

Constantine Verevis

Senior Lecturer, Monash University, Australia



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For Liam, with love
—CP

For these three: Mia, Zoi, Julie
—CV

Also by Claire Perkins

AMERICAN SMART CINEMA

Also by Constantine Verevis

AFTER TASTE: Cultural Value and the Moving Image (*co-edited with Julia Vassilieva*)

FILM REMAKES

SECOND TAKES: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel (*co-edited with Carolyn Jess-Cooke*)

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Contributors

David Boyd is Conjoint Associate Professor of English and Film at the University of Newcastle. He is the author of *Film and the Interpretive Process* (1989), editor of *Perspectives on Alfred Hitchcock* (1995), and co-editor of *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality* (2006) and *Hitchcock at the Source: The Auteur as Adaptor* (2011).

Nicole Brenez teaches Cinema Studies at the University of Paris-1/Panthéon-Sorbonne. She has published several books including *Shadows de John Cassavetes* (1995), *De la Figure en général et du Corps en particulier: L'invention figurative au cinéma* (1998), *Abel Ferrara* (2007), *Traitement du Lumpenproletariat par le cinéma d'avant-garde* (2007) and *Cinémas d'avant-garde* (2007). She is the editor or co-editor of several books, including *Jeune, dure et pure: Une histoire du cinéma d'avant-garde et expérimental en France* (2001), *Jean-Luc Godard: Documents* (2006), and *Jean Epstein. Bonjour Cinéma und andere Schriften zum Kino* (2008). She contributes regularly to the journals *Trafic*, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and *Rouge*. She has been curator of the Cinémathèque française's avant-garde film sessions since 1996, and has organized film events and retrospectives in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, New York, Tokyo, Vienna, London, and Madrid.

Susan Felleman is an art historian, film scholar, and Associate Professor of Cinema Studies and Women's Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. She is the author of *Botticelli in Hollywood: The Films of Albert Lewin* (1997) and *Art in the Cinematic Imagination* (2006), as well as numerous essays on film and art. She is at work on two book projects: *Real Objects in Unreal Situations: Modern Art in Fiction Films*; and, with Steven Jacobs, a hand guide to an imaginary museum of cinematic arts.

Daniel Herbert is Assistant Professor in Screen Arts and Cultures at the University of Michigan, where he teaches courses on Adaptations, Apocalyptic Film and Television, The Contemporary Film Industry, Film History, and Film Theory. He earned his Ph.D. in Critical Studies from the University of Southern California. His research interests include the political economy of the media industries, theories of intertextuality and intermediality, media geographies, and transnational

cinemas. His essays appear in several collections and journals, including *Film Quarterly*, *Millennium Film Journal*, and *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*.

Nikki J. Y. Lee is Lecturer in Culture and Gender Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea. Her article "Salute to Mr. Vengeance: *Oldboy* and the Making of a transnational auteur Park Chan-wook" appears in *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film* edited by Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai (2008). Her forthcoming book is *Branding East Asian Cinema: Orientalism and Auteurism*.

Adrian Martin is Associate Professor in Film and Television Studies at Monash University. He is the author of numerous articles and book chapters, and co-editor of *Rouge* magazine. His books include: *Phantasms* (1994), *Once Upon a Time in America* (1998), *The Mad Max Movies* (2003) and (in Spanish) *Sublimes Obsesiones* (2004) and *¿Qué es el cine moderno?* (2008). He is also co-editor (with Jonathan Rosenbaum) of *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia* (2003).

Lucy Mazdon is Professor in Film Studies at the University of Southampton. She has published widely in the field of French film and television. Her publications include *Encore Hollywood: Remaking French Cinema* (2000) and the edited collections *France on Film: Reflections on Popular French Cinema* (2001), *The Contemporary Television Series* (with Michael Hammond, 2005) and *Je t'aime, moi non plus: Franco-British Cinematic Relations* (with Catherine Wheatley, 2010).

Philippe Met is Professor of French at the University of Pennsylvania where he teaches Literature and Film. He is Editor-in-Chief of *French Forum*, and the author of numerous articles on a wide range of topics (modern and contemporary poetry, fantastic literature, crime and horror cinema, graphic novels, etc.). His books include *Formules de la poésie : Etudes sur Ponge, Leiris, Char et Du Bouchet* (1999) and *La Lettre tue : Spectre(s) de l'écrit fantastique* (2008). He has edited *Le Savon* for volume II of Francis Ponge's *Collected Works* in the La Pléiade collection (2002), *André du Bouchet et ses Autres* (2003) and an issue of *Nu(e)* on French poet Yves Charnet (2009). With Jean-Michel Rabaté, he co-edited a special issue of *L'Esprit créateur* on Mallarmé (2000). He also worked with Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Lindrat-Guigues on the critical edition of Frédéric de Towarnicki's script for a never-completed film by Alain Resnais, *Les Aventures de Harry Dickson*. Currently, he is completing a book manuscript titled *Fausses Notes*. Finally, he is researching two book projects on cinema: one on the figure of the child and representations

of childhood in horror films; the other on ghost cinema, a study of uncompleted and inherently uncompletable film projects.

R. Barton Palmer is Calhoun Lemon Professor of Literature and Director of Film Studies at Clemson University. He is the author, editor, or general editor of numerous books devoted to various literary and cinematic subjects. Most recently, he has published (with Robert Bray) *Hollywood's Tennessee: The Williams Films and Postwar America* (2009), *To Kill a Mockingbird: The Relationship between the Text and the Film* (2008), and *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Fiction on Screen* (2007). His edited collections include *Larger Than Life: Movie Stars of the 1950s* (2010) and *Hitchcock at the Source: The Auteur as Adapter* (with David Boyd, 2011).

Claire Perkins is Assistant Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Monash University. She is the author of *American Smart Cinema* (2011) and co-editor of *B for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value* (2011).

Murray Pomerance is Professor in the Department of Sociology at Ryerson University. He is author of *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue: Eight Reflections on Cinema* (2011), *Edith Valmaine* (2010), *The Horse Who Drank the Sky: Film Experience Beyond Narrative and Theory* (2008), *Johnny Depp Starts Here* (2005), *Savage Time* (2005), *An Eye for Hitchcock* (2004), and *Magia D'Amore* (1999), as well as editor or co-editor of more than a dozen volumes including *A Little Solitaire: John Frankenheimer and American Film* (2011), *Shining in Shadows: Movie Stars of the 2000s* (2011), *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home* (2008), *City That Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination* (2007), *Cinema and Modernity* (2006), and *Enfant Terrible! Jerry Lewis in American Film* (2002). He is also the editor of "Techniques of the Moving Image" and the "Horizons of Cinema" series, and the co-editor of "Screen Decades" and "Star Decades" series.

Julian Stringer is Associate Professor in Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham. He is the editor of *Movie Blockbusters* (2003), and co-editor of *New Korean Cinema* (2005) and *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts* (2007).

Constantine Verevis is Senior Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Monash University, Melbourne. He is author of *Film Remakes* (2006) and co-editor of *Second Takes: Critical Approaches to the Film Sequel* (2010), *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* (2011), and *B for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value* (2011). His forthcoming co-authored book is *Australian Film Theory and Criticism Vol 1: Critical Positions* (2012).

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Introduction: Three Times

Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis

In one of the most self-reflexive moments of *Scream 2* (Wes Craven, 1998), a group of college students in a cinema studies seminar discusses the merits of sequels. Randy (Jamie Kennedy) – the “movie geek” of *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) – asserts that “sequels suck” and “by definition alone are inferior films,” only to be contradicted by classmates who claim that many sequels have surpassed their originals – *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986), *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) and *House II: The Second Story* (Ethan Wiley, 1987) are all offered up as examples.¹ At a sorority party that evening, another film student – Mickey (Timothy Olyphant), a character who is eventually revealed as one of *Scream 2*’s killers – continues the conversation: passing Randy, he bluntly nominates *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), claiming, “better story, improved effects.” Randy’s retort is automatic: “Not a sequel. Part of a trilogy. Completely planned.”

This book begins from the premise that is implicit in Randy’s words: within the broad category of sequels and series, the film trilogy is a form that is practiced and perceived as distinct. This is an idea that has for the most part been passed over in recent critical work on cinematic seriality, where trilogies (both planned and “accidental”) are absorbed into broader discussions of sequelization, repetition, and recycling. Across the essays here, the collection aims to identify the specific ways in which the trilogy manifests and circulates at the levels of production, reception, and criticism. It seeks to contextualize the trilogy form in terms of issues of remaking, sequelization, and serialization, with particular attention to the ways in which the trilogy operates as a site in which the discursive nature of these practices is made explicit. Importantly, this contextualization does not take shape as a search for “true” trilogies, but as an examination of the plasticity of the form,

and the value that the evocation of the number three brings to a set of films.

Remakes, sequels, series

The self-consciously negative attitude to sequels that Craven articulates through the Randy character in the *Scream* films remains best described by J. Hoberman's term "sequelitis," coined in a 1985 *American Film* article tracing cinematic developments of the previous decade. In recent years the view has been countered by the steadily expanding appearance of critical writing seeking to understand the structure and appeal of remakes, sequels, and series. The work of figures including Jennifer Forrest, Carolyn Jess-Cooke, Thomas Leitch, Lucy Mazdon, and Constantine Verevis has aimed to disrupt the popular and unreflective view that serial forms of filmmaking simply demonstrate post-classical Hollywood's efforts to capitalize on existing audiences.

Two central impulses are clear in this work. The first is a drive to differentiate and taxonomize, evident in the broadly accepted view that a sequel *continues* a story where a remake *repeats* it. For Leitch, the difference in rhetorical stance reflects a fundamentally different narrative appeal:

the audience for sequels wants to find out more, to spend more time with characters they are interested in and to find out what happened to them after their story was over. The audience for remakes does not expect to find out anything new in this sense: they want the same story again, though not exactly the same. (142)

Forrest takes the logic further to distinguish sequels from series, suggesting that sequels operate in a linear fashion to pick up the thread of their characters' lives, whereas each entry in a film series offers new adventures for the characters in a temporally indistinct manner: "the sequel takes place in a semblance of real time; the series ostensibly belongs to an eternal present" (7). For both writers, these patterns of differentiation lead to exact positions on what constitutes a "true" remake, sequel, or series.

If this first impulse aspires broadly to *limitation*, the second aspires to *multiplication*. This position implicitly acknowledges that drawing a fundamental distinction between repetition (remakes) and continuation (sequels/series) obscures the fact that the process of continuation is always *also* a process of repetition – of characters and actors, plots and

scenarios, themes, styles, and title terms. In a sequel, these elements are repeated in a different form insofar as they are, precisely, *continued*: as with film remakes, the difference in sequelized productions is encapsulated within their terms of repetition. Other work on remakes and sequels thus questions the utility of a strictly taxonomic approach, arguing that there is necessarily a degree of subjectivism involved in the nomination of types, and an overlap between categories when applied to (especially contemporary) examples. Conceiving of these forms as particularly crystallized examples of the patterns of repetition and difference that characterize filmmaking more generally, critical attention shifts from an attempt to *regulate* the field toward a desire to open it up through issues of genre, intertextuality, and reception:

concomitant with the gamut of merchandizing tie-ins, cross-media platforms, and film franchises that inform contemporary Hollywood cinema, the sequel is primarily a site within which communal spectatorship and paratextual discourses may be circulated, and by which the experience of an "original" may be extended, revisited, and heightened. (Jess-Cooke and Verevis 5)

At this end of the spectrum, the potential exists to lateralize the concept of remaking and sequelization entirely, and nominate that all filmmaking exists within this matrix insofar as all filmmaking is (necessarily) intertextual. The distance moved from the impulse to *contain* the concept is apparent in the conclusion reached by Hans Maes in a *Cinemascope* article on film remakes: specifically, his self-confessedly "vague and unhelpful characterization [that] in order to be called a remake, a movie must in some relevant way be comparable to a previous movie" (7). At this point, in terms of patterns of repetition and difference, there is no workable differentiation between a remake, a sequel, and broader ideas of intertextuality (see Frow).

Trilogies

The form of the film trilogy is a compelling site for an examination of the malleable ideas that circulate within critical discussion of remaking and sequelization. At the industrial, textual, and critical levels that will be outlined below, the trilogy precisely demonstrates the conflicting impulses toward limitation and multiplication that characterize the field. The nomination distinguishes and limits a set of films in a manner that is more precise than either "sequel" or "series," but is inherently

unstable, always vulnerable to the appearance of a subsequent film, or a differing authorial or critical skew. The trilogy is also an area in which sequelization is thought and practiced in creative ways. Where films that are nominated as sequels or series still tend to be produced and understood in industrially defined terms, throughout cinema history the trilogy has consistently been associated with ideas of aesthetics and auteurism. While clearly apparent as a commercial form, it can also be readily identified with the ideas that characterize progressive contemporary work on remaking. Indeed, the trilogy is a site where the discursive conditions of remaking that ground all sequels are made explicit.

In this way, the differing uses and perceptions of the idea of the trilogy can be best mapped in the terms developed within this discourse, which proposes at least two categories of remaking to exist beyond a commercial understanding. Where “direct,” industrial remakes are determined through titles and/or copyright, the *textual* category of remaking is concerned with the repetition of plots, structures, and styles across films. Within the *critical* category, extra-textual issues of reception and discourse – reviews, DVD extras, marketing campaigns, word of mouth – constitute a remake beyond the realm of acknowledged credits or clear textual signifiers (Verevis, *Film Remakes* 2).² The collective intention of the essays in this volume is not to draw these categories through as strict taxonomic fields for understanding the film trilogy, but rather to mobilize them as a way of acknowledging the broad *styles* of the trilogy, between which there is inevitable overlap.

Industry

The industrial category of the film trilogy offers the most visible example of the form, as well as the most volatile. The popular image of the form is most likely to be associated with well-known Hollywood examples such as the Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, and Matrix films.³ These trilogies function as planned, tripartite exercises, where the designation is a specific prop in the films’ production and marketing. Each set of films was initially promoted as a three-part series to build a sense of stature and anticipation designed to translate into box-office returns upon the release of the first and second sequels. Promotion of the trilogy structure builds and encapsulates a sense of intentional and authorial agency that, as Timothy Corrigan has identified, works as a “brand-name vision whose aesthetic meanings and values have already been determined” (40). In the case of The Lord of the Rings films – as well as those of the “Millennium trilogy”⁴ – this effect is often described