

Obsession With Memory: Cinematic Remakes and Consumption to Aesthetic Violence*

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The aim of this paper is to first understand the reason for the increase in the production of cinematic remakes in the last decades, since the so-called “obsession for memory” in contemporaneity, to later establish a counterpoint between the remakes produced with Hollywood aesthetic standards and their films of origin that do not belong to the American film industry. This counterpoint will be made from the aesthetic form by which the images of Hollywood remakes, especially in the 21st century, are imposed authoritatively on the viewer. This means that we will analyze the exacerbation of aesthetic violence in the practice of this cinematographic genre and discuss the consumption of compulsory images in contemporary society, investigating the consequences that its imposition brings to the construction of our memory.

Keywords: remake, aesthetics, cinema, violence, memory

Introduction

The critic Andreas Huyssen (2000; 2014) has sought, in some of his works, to denounce the obsession for memory that characterizes contemporary societies. He identified this obsession as “one of the most surprising cultural and political phenomena of recent years” (Huyssen, 2000, p. 9). The author stated that, from the 1980s, the focus on the future shifts to what he will call past presents. Since then, the cultural industry—a concept created by the German philosopher Theodor Adorno and referring to the fact that cultural goods are treated in the same way as industrial goods—attributes to the present an increasing number of past, such as “retro fashions, authentic retro furniture, museologization of everyday life through camcorders, Facebook and other social media, nostalgic reunions of older rock musicians, etc” (Huyssen, 2014, p. 15).

We see the past invade the present in the most varied forms—memories, images, simulacra, and indices. The practice of remakes fits, among others, into this obsession, becoming a cultural phenomenon nowadays: “The original remakes are fashionable and, like cultural theorists and critics, we are obsessed with re-representation, repetition, replication, and copy culture, with or without the original” (Huyssen, 2000, p. 24).

These remakes are also present in the universe of cinema. In the last few decades, we have witnessed a progressive increase in the production of movie remakes, or better, in the production of Hollywood remakes of

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successful films in the past, or recent productions, originating in all parts of the world. We can observe a rescue of stories of films that have already been produced in order to be rewritten by the Hollywood aesthetic standards, the standards that will be established in the course of this paper.

Our aim here is to first understand the reason for the increase in the production of cinematic remakes in the last decades, to later establish a counterpoint between the remakes produced by Hollywood aesthetic standards and their films of origin that do not belong to the American film industry. This counterpoint will be made from the aesthetic form by which the images of Hollywood remakes, especially in the 21st century, are imposed authoritatively on the viewer. This means that we will analyze the exacerbation of aesthetic violence in the practice of this cinematographic genre and discuss the consumption of compulsory images in contemporary society, investigating the consequences that its imposition brings to the construction of our memory.

The Remakes as a Cultural Phenomenon

The appearance of the remakes can be dated almost in conjunction with the emergence of the cinema itself. We do not know for sure the specific date of the first remake produced in the history of cinema, but we can cite as one of the first—and perhaps the most reproduced, with 33 official versions, 14 of which reproduced between 1908 and 1920 (Augusto, 1999, p. 11)—the film *Dr. Jekyll and M. Hyde*. But we can say that cinema has been repeating and reproducing its own narratives and genres practically since its own creation in the late 19th century.

The practice of cinematic remakes is not an exclusive Hollywood phenomenon. They are part of the film culture and are present in every country in the world. But, as the United States is the world's largest producer of audiovisual, they are also the largest producer of remakes. To get an idea, according to the IMDB¹ Website (Internet movie data base), there are in the database, 4,798 American remakes referring to all known cinematographic genres.

Currently, the remakes belong to a worldwide cinematographic culture and have gained their place in the cinematographic production. But, only from the 1970s, can we begin to treat the cinematic remake as a cultural phenomenon. Only in the late 1990s, it consolidates, due to the large increase in production of the genre. In the last decades, we have been following a progressive growth in the production of cinematographic remakes, or rather, in the production of Hollywood remakes of past successful films or even recent originated in all parts of the world.

Australian professor and author Constantine Verevis (2006) wrote in his book *Film Remakes*, that the remake is seen as a trend stimulated by the commercial side of the Hollywood conglomerate. In this way, Hollywood remakes are often seen as just an attempt by the film industry to replicate some success from the past by minimizing the risks due to the familiar appeal that that film produces in the viewer. However, they also produce a commercial paradox. This paradox happens because, while the remake producers want to keep elements of movies that have previously been successful—in another time or in another culture—they must also introduce generic or universal elements in order to standardize the aesthetics of the film for a global marketing. That is, remakes often keep the familiar, such as the title and the synopsis, and introduce standard formulas for success at the time or culture of the remake, such as famous actors, special effects of last

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com>.

generation, common places—mostly in the United States—and standardized and non-enigmatic sensations—as we can see in art films, for example.

Another interesting way of explaining the progressive increase of this cultural phenomenon, besides the commercial question brought by Verevis, could be the incessant technological advance that we are witnessing, because it would allow special effects that perhaps were not possible in the time of production of older films. This is especially true in the film genres of horror and science fiction, such as the remakes of director Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and director Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981). The new productions of these films—released in 2007 and 2013, respectively—had a reality through their special effects much greater than their originals, due to new technologies that were previously unavailable.

On this subject, the cinematographic critic and theorist André Bazin states in his text *Remade in the USA* (2014), that some art-making techniques lose their value and become obsolete when replaced by a more modern technique, and so does cinema.

The signs of this so-called “obsolescence” are varied. According to Bazin (2014), the most obvious happened in the following transitions: from silent to sonorous, from the orthochromatic film to the panchromatic, and from the black and white cinematography to the color one. We must consider the fact that André Bazin wrote this text more than 60 years ago and, in this period, technology evolved much faster than it evolved until the middle of the 20th century. Thus, we could add in its list of technological transitions the following cinematic evolutions: the replacement of the film of celluloid with digital, replacing the mounting brackets by editing on the computer, the special effects, better known by trickery, which have been replaced by computer graphic imagery (CGI) among others.

For Bazin, these technological transitions would be some of the reasons why American producers and directors insist on making remakes. But if the technological advances were really the only reason for this “flash flood” of remakes, typical of contemporaneity, how to explain the movies that do not make use of any new technological apparatus? Two examples: the remakes of the films *Funny Games* (1997), of the director Michael Haneke; and *Psycho* (1960) by director Alfred Hitchcock—released in 2007 and 1998, respectively—were filmed identically to the originals, frame by frame, that is, no new technology was used (with the exception of the camera). Is it then a lack of creativity proper to our time? Or is it more plausible that we are faced with a cultural and political phenomenon that can be explained?

In order to answer these questions, we can return to Huyssen's ideas. In his book *Cultures of the Past-Present* (2014), the author sought to identify the cause of phenomena associated with the current practices of memory, such as musealization, the return of the retro, nostalgia for the ruins—and we can add here also the production of movie remakes—that began at the end of the 20th century and are still not expected to end.

Huyssen (2000) had already tried to understand this phenomenon since his earlier work *Seduced by Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and Media*, where he placed the emergence of memory as one of the central cultural and political concerns of Western societies. According to the author, from the 1980s, the return to the past would be replacing the privilege given to the future, which had been so important in the early decades of 20th-century modernity. For him, the focus of “future presents” shifts to “past presents” or, as he clarified in his book, “the nostalgic yearning of the past is also always a nostalgia for another place. Nostalgia can be an inverted utopia” (Huyssen, 2014, p. 91). It is, however, a utopia already appropriated by the cultural industry. Huyssen said that memory itself can become a commodity put into circulation by an industry that devours culture always in search of new forms of consumption.

It is perhaps from this process of memory industrialization that is observed the increase of the production of remakes, promoted mainly by the American cinematographic industry. There draws our attention to the large number of remakes of foreign films, mainly films originally produced on the European continent, such as Cameron Crow's *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and his original *Abra Los ojos*, by Alejandro Amenábar (1997, Spain); *Nine*, by Rob Marshall (2009) and his original *8½*, by Federico Fellini (1963, Italy); and *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ramin Bahrani (2018) and his original *Fahrenheit 451*, by François Truffaut (1966, UK). The original films move in the opposite direction to the Hollywood proposal. They are less commercial, existentialist films (the spectator has room for his own interpretations and reflections on the images) and aesthetically delicate and subtle, respecting the time of assimilation of the images by the spectators. On the other hand, their Hollywood remakes end up being produced in a very different way from the original proposal: They are extremely commercial films, with multimillion dollar budgets, aesthetically explicit, that is, the spectator has no room for any particular reflection during the film due to its standardized form of interpretation. This is a bewildering aesthetic format, as we will see below.

Aesthetic Violence

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, known for his cultural and political critiques in postmodernity, presents in his book *Violence: Six Side Reflections* (2014), different forms of violence in the contemporary world through two interesting concepts: The first would be the most common form of violence, the subjective one. It is directly visible and practiced by an easily detectable agent, is the violence that is exercised, for example, in acts of crimes, terrorism, and civil confrontations. The second form would be objective violence. It is an invisible type that can be subdivided into two parts: symbolic and systemic objective violence. This last one would be the tragic consequence of the functioning of our economic and political system, for example, the violence that occurs in relations of domination and exploitation. The symbolic violence, the most dangerous, would be the imposition of a universe of meaning through language and its forms. It is this last type of violence that we will privilege in the present work. We will approach it in its aesthetic imagistic dimension, that is, in the way we are affected by the images.

Aesthetics (from Greek *aisthēsis*: perception or sensation) is a branch of philosophy that has as its object not only the processes of artistic creation but, above all, the ways in which aesthetic phenomena affect our sensations and perceptions. It is “the way in which, before we formulate expressible meanings in words, the world makes sense to us according to the way in which it affects us and by which we affect it” (Elkaim & Stengers, 1994, p. 48).

To make the issue of aesthetic violence clearer, we must understand that we do not necessarily attribute this aesthetic to films with images of violent content, but to the device by which they operate. We understand by device “anything that has in any way the ability to capture, guide, determine, intercept, model, control, and ensure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, and discourses of living beings” (Agamben, 2009, p. 40). In this sense, we will consider as violent films with an aesthetic form imposed strongly on the viewer—whether through image shocks or standardized sensations—films about which our freedom of interpretation is reduced and about which, apparently, we have no possibility of creating our own sense. In our perspective, the violence lies in restricting the creative thinking of the viewer, imposing previously interpreted images, even if the film seems smooth. Violent is the image that limits reflection beyond the interpretation it intends to impose.

In other words, what is being understood here by violence is not reduced to aggressive, impetuous, and uncontrolled action or movement. It also refers to the impositions and constraints on the movement, rhythm, and form of something or someone, disregarding their possibilities of choice.

This is exactly the aesthetic format we can observe in contemporary Hollywood remakes, especially the remakes of films originally produced on the European continent, as exemplified earlier. It is this format that we are calling violent.

In the case of the exemplified remakes—*Vanilla Sky*, *Nine*, and *Fahrenheit 451*—we identify their aesthetic as violent, because, besides the many reasons already mentioned, we can complement saying that: Their scripts do not leave a loose end; all actions and events are justified in the scenes of the films through dialogues or through the images themselves, and with that we have no room for doubt or enigmas; their history can take place anywhere in the world, unlike its originals, which contained very peculiar traits. As much as the screenplay of these films geographically identifies where the stories go, their commercial appeal is global, and so their aesthetic is standardized in order to be consumed in all parts of the world. Thus, there is no room for different interpretations of what is seen on the movie screen.

We should keep in mind that we can not generalize and say that all Hollywood remakes are aesthetically violent, but we can say that their vast majority is. And, of course, the examples used here are. The authoritarian imposition of a meaning, whether through the image or dialogues, is precisely what we characterize, in this work, as a violent aesthetic form. We consider that the imposition of a universe of meaning (Zizek, 2014), that is, the imposition of a previously constructed form of interpretation, which makes it impossible for the viewer to create a different meaning than the filmmakers are proposing, is a form of violence.

Through the cinema, as a medium of expression of an era, it is possible to see how the use of certain aesthetic forms affect the ways of feeling in different historical periods and how they construct or impact subjectivity. With this, we ask ourselves the motive of the cinematographic public to look for these images that we are here calling aesthetically violent. Of course, the intense onslaughts of propaganda and special effects (the best money can buy) contribute to a greater visibility of Hollywood remakes over their European originals. But why are they so successful in contemporary societies, to the extent that the spectator goes to the movies, to sit in his armchair, and to let himself be led by minimizing his critical awareness? Reformulating the question: How do viewers accept that the Hollywood industry imposes aesthetically violent images to the point of not leaving room for any criticism on their part? How does this violence consume us, and is consumed by us, so naturally?

Consumption to Violence

Professor Karl Erik Schollhammer, in his book *Scene of Crime: Violence and Realism in Contemporary Brazil* (2013), stated that violence imposes itself on us so much that it becomes a permanent element of the daily life of the inhabitants of large cities “and, more fundamentally, national culture and artistic and literary expressions” (Schollhammer, 2013, p. 7)—including cinema. For him, narrating or expressing violence in words and images “are ways of dealing with it, of creating forms of protection or of digestion of its consequences” (Schollhammer, 2013, p. 7). In this case, violence would be produced in the literature, in the plastic arts and in the cinema as a way of protecting or elaborating violence itself. However, Schollhammer referred to the expressions of violence by cultural producers, but not to the violence consumed by viewers of such products. So, we ask ourselves: How to justify this consumption of violence? In the service of what it gives himself?

The German philosopher Christoph Türcke (2009) stated that we live surrounded by audiovisual stimulus. There is an excess of stimuli that bombard us and provoke shock effects on us. As these audiovisual products are part of our time and our way of feeling, it would not be possible to abstain from these images. The solution that Türcke observes, between contemporaneous consumers of these shocks, is the use of an auto-vaccination mechanism whereby individuals undergo small doses of violence to immunize against it. Faced with image omnipresence, we have only to vaccinate gradually, that is, to consume images in a controlled way in order to achieve a form of immunization in relation to aesthetic violence.

It is a paradoxical behavior that consists in applying in itself—or, more precisely, allowing it to be applied—the very poison to be avoided: “This procedure resembles a process of self-vaccination, in which the body administers itself a dose of the dreadful, in order to become immune to it, that is, it turns against itself in order to preserve itself” (Türcke, 2009, p. 133).

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say, from what we have seen so far, that the success of violent remakes produced by the most recent cultural industry, the same industry that has made memory a product or a good of consumption, could be articulated to the need to deal with the daily violence experienced by the spectators. In that case, consuming violence in images could be a way of dealing with it, protecting itself, through small controlled doses, from the violence that surrounds us. The increase of violence in audiovisual products shows us a new sensitivity characteristic of contemporaneity. And the very consumption of aesthetically violent films, as we have seen, is associated with new forms of self-preservation in relation to the violence brought by today’s image omnipresence.

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