

New Releases

Remakes hurt Hollywood's image

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"Good Will Hunting") and filled with hip new stars, the film is a full-color remake of the original. Nothing here is new except the actors and the color, made so despite the fact that Hitchcock shot the original in black and white for increased drama and artistic use of shadow and lighting.

Universal Pictures failed to respond to calls regarding "Psycho," due out Dec. 4.

Some say that Universal Picture's latest endeavor is indicative of a general lack of originality in Hollywood script writers. Others claim the slew of remakes are due to a more intense drive for monetary gain on the part of Hollywood executives. The general consensus, however, is that remakes usually just don't work. Aside from a few exceptions, many don't become box-office blockbusters and most are forgotten.

Convenience and a lack of creativity are among some of the reasons for the remake resurgence, but many believe there is simply a lower financial risk to refilming proven material.

"When one or two (remakes) make some money, it's enough to keep the studio afloat, and since people are so starved for good films, they'll flock to see something halfway decent," said documentary producer and film historian Bruce Crawford. "There is a lack of originality, and Hollywood is afraid of trying something new. They're unwilling to take a chance."

Wheeler Winston Dixon, English professor and chairman of the film studies program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said remakes are basically Hollywood's version of a marketing ploy: a way to reintroduce tested properties and rebuild franchises that have already been done. Hence "Psycho."

Refreshing old ideas is nothing less than the foundation of any living art form, including film. But Hollywood took things a step further in 1976 when Dino De Laurentis produced a remake of 1933's classic film "King Kong." Despite a lackluster box office return, the floodgates were opened for good.

In the past five years or so, remakes returned bigger than ever, and Dixon said the problems that plagued the stale film industry during the '80s have swollen to the point that nowadays Hollywood is interested only in safe bets.

"The cost of making a movie has risen, and the financial stakes are that much higher. Therefore, it's really becoming more cash-driven," Dixon said. "It's a sad state of affairs, but the fact is that even if the new 'Psycho' is terrible, everyone will go see it out of curiosity."

The continuing presence of remakes in theaters proves that the public generally takes what it is given. However, despite Hollywood's dwindling attention span, original films like "Trainspotting" and the studio renegade "The English Patient" do pop up from time to time, and both critics and fans show their appreciation with acclaim and revenue.

The existence of these original films would imply that filmmakers prefer on-screen creativity over artistically null, but financially acceptable, remakes.

Sandy Veneziano, production designer for the soon-to-be-released big screen version of the 1960s television series "My Favorite Martian," said many producers and directors are, indeed, artists. But Hollywood's decision-makers aren't the same people who are behind the cameras.

"I think there are a lot of good writers still, it's just that Hollywood isn't choosing the scripts," Veneziano said. "I think Hollywood filmmakers are few and far between, and it's mainly accountants. The heads of studios are the ones making the decisions on projects."

Veneziano was the production designer for the highly successful 1991 remake of 1950s comedy "Father of the Bride." She said there is a flip side to all the remakes flooding the marketplace, namely that it returns public interest to timeless classics.

"Father of the Bride" was very successful in the '50s, and it wasn't that the first version wasn't good enough. We thought we could give it a new look and make it fun, and it was very successful," Veneziano

said. "It also helps the studio because people will go to Blockbuster and rent the original out of curiosity to see the difference."

Dan Kines, manager at Audio-Visual Video Center, said, for the most part, what Veneziano says is true.

"Generally, people rent a lot of the newer films, but there are some that rent the older one to compare," Kines said. "Like when 'Dr. Doolittle' came out, a lot of people rented the original."

"It's not like a really significant amount, but it rents more than it otherwise would."

While blips of renewed interest in original films are all well and good, Hollywood's recent cannibalistic philosophy raises questions about the future of film.

Veneziano foresees a happy ending.

"I think the independents are going to become stronger and stronger. Those are the pictures that people want to see, and the studio executives will try to find them," she said. "It's going to be really hit-and-miss because the executives don't want to gamble, but slowly they're realizing that it doesn't always work."

Next month, when the verbatim "Psycho" hits theaters across the nation for a second time, the remake will mark a milestone in film history by proving that remakes are becoming the most literal definition of the word: glossy reproductions of original artistry.

Film aficionados, including Hitchcock purists, will certainly stand in line for the new "Psycho," but it's doubtful they believe the future of film is going to improve if Hollywood continues to pillage the past rather than explore new territory.

Dixon believes this public endorsement of remakes inevitably guarantees their future in Hollywood.

"I think people will continue to see the films, even with the deteriorating quality, because they don't have a choice. It's all they're given," Dixon said. "I don't think the situation is going to improve, and, basically, as long as people aren't offered an alternative, things are going to get worse."

Alanis Morissette
"Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie"
Maverick
Grade: C-

The high priestess of angst hasn't turned in her crown of thorns yet.

Alanis Morissette, whose well-positioned hair provides her only cover in her video for "Thank You," is still fully wrapped in hostility.

And this time, she adds the price of success to her list of vexations.

Alanis' new album, "Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie," is her first since the best-selling "Jagged Little Pill."

A much-anticipated endeavor, the album is being watched by fans and music industry execs to see how it stands up to her first album's Guinness Book of Records standing as biggest-selling debut album.

Well, it's sure to sell, but more because of the success of "Jagged Little Pill" than because of its own merits.

In many ways, the album represents the amount of growing up Morissette has done since "Jagged Little Pill" was released. The songs feature more intricate, complex melodies and harmonies, and the album's highly synthetic nature provides a more mature tone.

But that voice is still there... that voice that climbs up a series of notes, snapping the last one off like an angry hedge trimmer. When Alanis sings, it's as if someone took a sharp fingernail to your brain stem. You can't help but cringe.

And that voice fights with the music for most of the album. Alanis struggles to dominate over the string arrangements, the synthesized drum lines, the guitar, the bass and the synthesizer. The music drowns her out, and Alanis fights back by punching her lyrics harder and screaming the notes higher.

Only a few songs manage to escape the tumbling, stumbling cycle.

The album opens with "Front Row," a hard-driving number where Alanis' anger is partially projected upon herself. The song, reminiscent of "You Oughta Know," features a healthy dose of self-distrust over a forceful guitar line and drum beat.

"UR," which sounds most like the songs from Alanis' last album, returns to more folkish roots. With its melodic harmonica and guitar lines, the song features a milder Alanis singing about her maturation in the music industry. She progresses from hopeful to terrified to resilient, showing that success has actually taught her something.

Alanis also softens for the apologetic "One." Above the smooth, lyrical piano and gentle drum line, Alanis calmly admits to being a pretentious, loud hypocrite. (Well, at least she admits it.)

Overall, Alanis fans will probably not find the tunes on this album as catchy as those on "Jagged Little Pill." Since the album is destined for radio-overplay heaven, this may be a blessing for non-fans: These songs definitely won't get stuck in your head like "Ironic" or "Head Over Feet."

For those who were hoping Alanis would find peace in her old age, "Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie" will be just as hard to swallow as "Jagged Little Pill."

-Liza Holtmeier

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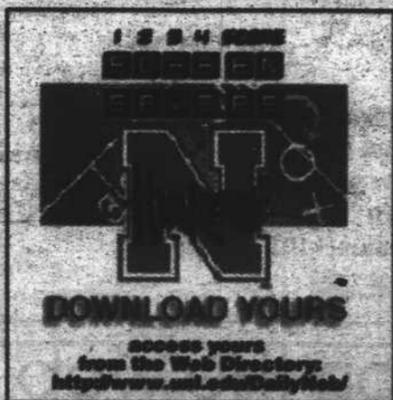
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