

# I'll Be Back: The Return of Movie Icons and the Disappearance of Original Films

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**Abstract:** When you think of new movie releases, you likely think of the latest additions to large movie franchises. It seems that the only pictures getting attention are sequels, adaptations, or remakes—and to the average moviegoer, it may appear that original films not based on preexisting content have disappeared from the box office. While some suggest that Hollywood's well of creativity has dried up, it is more likely that this phenomenon is economically motivated.

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As a child, I was always in awe of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader—their glowing and buzzing lightsabers, countless alien species and planets, and the imaginative world in which the *Star Wars* movies took place. My father introduced me to the movies, and it was only fitting that he and I finished the saga together by watching the ninth episode, *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019). However, we both left the theater feeling disappointed. The film hadn't quite felt like the *Star Wars* I knew from my childhood years—yet at the same time, it featured the well-known faces of iconic characters who passed through familiar plotlines. Although new people and events were introduced, my dad and I concluded that it was dissatisfying because it had tried so hard to be something it wasn't—the original trilogy.

Despite the mutual disillusionment my dad and I shared, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* seemed to be a hit with audiences. It earned over half a billion dollars in the United States alone, which is no small feat for Walt Disney Studios (“Domestic Box Office”). The studio prospered in 2019 and claimed nine of the twenty-five top-grossing films of the year, including *Avengers: Endgame*, a movie that excited fans by connecting the twenty-one previous movies that already made up the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Enthusiasm among moviegoers pushed it to become the highest-grossing movie of all time (that is, until *Avatar* (2009) was re-released and reclaimed its title in 2021). In 2019, Disney also found success with sequels like *Toy Story 4*, *Frozen II*, and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*, along with live action remakes of animated classics such as *The Lion King*, *Aladdin*, and *Dumbo*.

Remakes, book and video game adaptations, sequels, and additions to film franchises dominate the contemporary box office. In fact, of the twenty-five top-grossing films of 2019, only three do not fall into one of those categories (“Domestic Box Office”). Only those three

(*Us*, *Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood*, and *Knives Out*) claimed an original screenplay. It can be alarming to recognize how few original films thrive at the box office, while so many sequels, remakes, and adaptations are greenlit for production, and some have claimed this may be a major issue. One film critic observed that many of the films he reviewed recently have been “bad, weary, and entirely unnecessary” additions to “largely tired franchise[s],” and asserted that “there’s a paralyzing lack of creativity” (McCarthy). He is not alone; there seems to be a general consensus among critics, audiences, and even filmmakers that the movies from recent years have not been as original or imaginative as those from previous film eras. While some seem perfectly content lining up for the opening of the newest *Fast & Furious*, others go as far as to prophesize the downfall of Hollywood, claiming its stream of creativity has run dry. It’s hard to say whether this case of ‘sequelitis’ is as bad as it’s made out to be, but one thing is certain: while the abundance of sequels, adaptations, and remakes does not necessarily mean Hollywood is in a creative funk, the attention those films receive harms the success of original movies.

While there are many movies based on pre existing source material, their existence doesn’t directly indicate that creativity is gone; creativity can be found even in the very movies that critics point to as evidence of its absence. Though it is certain that adaptations and remakes typically show less ingenuity than original movies, it should also be acknowledged that they are not entirely void of novelty. For example, sequels often offer new experiences by combining new stories with familiar characters. In the case of adapting a literary work, a book with hundreds of pages must be transfigured into an audiovisual format lasting around two hours—which is no small feat, especially considering that the process typically requires significant reevaluation and reimagination of the pacing and plot. Screenwriters and directors can choose to alter the setting, time period, characters, or include plot twists (Bohnenkamp et al.). One media analyst points out

that film adaptations of comic books and toy lines “may be produced more imaginatively” since they tend to have open-ended stories and unique, fantastic characters (Kim). Even remakes and reboots can introduce originality as a response to current cultural and political environments. *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) reflected society’s optimism as effects of the Great Depression waned and President Roosevelt’s New Deal brought relief, reform, and recovery to the nation—but the filmmakers behind *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991) decided to make a darker film and “grafted racial and sexual liberation themes to the myth” to reflect the screenwriter’s perception of society and politics at the time (Georgakas). While based on the same preexisting stories and characters, these two films imaginatively adjusted plots and roles to respond to the most pressing social issues at the time of their creation, resulting in two widely different films. Remakes, adaptations, sequels, and reboots all require an element of creativity. Even though the movie theaters are saturated with these types of listings, they do not represent a total lack of originality.

There are explanations for why movie studios release adaptations and sequels one after the other. They tend to perform well with audiences—Hollywood has found a successful formula to keep moviegoers coming back for more. After studying box office reports, a group of analysts discovered that the economic success of sequels and adaptations “can be linked to their ability to offer sensations (by inventing new adventures...) in combination with high levels of familiarity (a hero who is well-known from previous cinematic or literary adventures)” (Bohnenkamp et al.). For viewers, familiar films that feature favored characters and comfortable settings are low-risk investments. For example, in the *Star Wars* saga, many of the same characters (such as fan-favorite droids C-3PO and R2-D2) appear in many of the movies, even if they are not essential to the plot. Their appearances in the later movies works “not only to reinspire the

audience's affection for the characters but to call up the spectacle of C-3PO and R2-D2 by superficially reiterating their connection to the prior films we loved" (Berliner). These established connections, along with nostalgia for previous films, convince audiences to head to theaters and push those films to the forefront of popular culture. For example, *Twilight* (2008) capitalized off the connection readers had to the books, and *Jurassic World* (2015) drew upon the connections established twenty years prior by Steven Spielberg's films. The popularity of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), which cast Tom Holland alongside Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield (stars of the previous *Spider-Man* (2002-2007) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012-2014) movies, respectively), may be explained by viewers' connection to previous movies, comic books, and former iterations of Peter Parker. By combining familiarity with new sensations, Hollywood persuades audiences that they will enjoy movies enough to invest their time and money into them.

By offering high levels of familiarity, the film industry is greeted with the open wallets of large audiences. Many viewers feel more confident paying admission to a movie if they already have a connection to the story. An analysis on the profitability of movie adaptations and sequels found that they generally gross more than original films. The analysis specified adaptations of comic books and toy lines (such as *The Lego Movie* (2014)) as the most successful type, and noted that "if produced in sequels, these adaptations from comic books and toy lines likely are guaranteed profit at the worldwide box office" (Kim). Marvel movies, which are based upon comic books, are a notable example of how profitable adaptations and sequels can be. Most earn about \$800 million worldwide, with the *Avengers* movies easily surpassing the one-billion-dollar mark and *Endgame* making more than twice that number (Goldberg). Familiarity seems to be the most convincing form of advertising in driving moviegoers to see a particular film. Studios are

so confident that audiences will turn out and pay up for movies that offer comfort that they are granted large budgets and, in the case of adaptations, pay the high costs of licensing preexisting material. Even though the appearance of familiar faces or places in sequels is often criticized as a lack of creativity, more often than not it is an attempt to continue drawing moviegoers into the theater and provide them with what they are willing to pay for.

Such a discussion would be incomplete without considering the factors at play for the creators of these film franchises: the movie studios. Sequels are often used as a selling point or an incentive to excite investors. For example, during the Walt Disney Company's first quarter report this year, CEO Bob Chapek commented on the "record revenue" early in the fiscal year and looked forward to the future, seemingly hopeful about the results of "the launch of a new franchise with *Encanto*" ("Walt Disney Company"). The quick success of *Encanto* (2021), released only two and a half months before the announcement, apparently convinced Disney that more films based upon it would be profitable. Further understanding of the company's goals can be found in a memo to Disney staff, in which Chapek noted that they "are a big company with many constituents and stakeholders, all of whom have a place in our decision-making", yet their most important guide ought to be "the consumer" (qtd. in Weprin). Note the term "consumer," which serves to reiterate Disney's intention of running a business with the goal of commercial success. With profit as the leading concern, it makes sense that studios would choose to concentrate on sequels and remakes given their higher likelihood of good returns, even if that means audience nostalgia must be exploited.

The quest for revenue isn't the only thing Hollywood's major movie studios have in common—they also often share CEOs. It is not uncommon for a CEO to leave and take on a new executive position at another motion picture studio. For example, Stacey Snider began as

Chairman of Universal Pictures, then became the CEO of DreamWorks, then the CEO of Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, where she replaced James Gianopulos, who then went on to Paramount Pictures. Tony Vinciguerra, who also spent time at Fox, is now the CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment, taking over a role previously filled by Michael Lynton, who had worked at both the Walt Disney Company and WarnerMedia. When those working in such important leadership roles relocate to other studios, it becomes likely that their business ideologies—including that of favoring movies based on existing intellectual property—is transferred and integrated into the studio as well. The greenlight process remains relatively unclear to outsiders and varies from studio to studio—yet some studios grant CEOs power to single handedly greenlight or veto movies, should the CEOs be concerned over profitability. However, most studios gather committees consisting of various executives (including chairpersons, CEOs, and even CFOs). Discussions that take place early in development often touch upon marketing and distribution. Some studios, such as Lionsgate, supposedly attempt to estimate profits during this process (Galloway). The film must generally have some promise of profitability before the greenlight for production is given, making sequels, reboots, and remakes more likely to be picked up over original films.

Because these films cater heavily to audience desires, it should come as no surprise that movies based on existing material tend to perform well and steal the spotlight at box offices. Despite the number of sequels, adaptations, and remakes, original movies are still released regularly—although they tend to receive very little attention from ordinary moviegoers. While motion picture studios tend to invest large budgets into movies that will gather both attention and profit, original screenplays usually receive smaller budgets, must be made by smaller independent studios, or are sometimes not produced at all. Even George Lucas and Steven

Spielberg described the difficulty they faced to get backing for their original films *Red Tails* (2012) and *Lincoln* (2012), which “barely got into theaters.” When original films do manage to get produced, success is not guaranteed. Their limited budgets often add difficulty to creating movies that will be popular with common audiences. It is likely that audiences will not recognize the hired cast or crew (Jess-Cooke). Marketing and advertising are also impacted, if not sacrificed altogether, which original films desperately need since they do not have established fanbases. Less advertising typically leads to fewer moviegoers being convinced to watch unfamiliar motion pictures, or even noticing the existence of these films in the first place. Ultimately, the current Hollywood trends which favor sequels and adaptations often hinder the success of original films.

Although audiences may not be willing to take risks on original movies by paying the rising costs of tickets, they may be more likely to view them in their homes if the films are included in their monthly streaming fees. Streaming services have been able to connect viewers with original films that may have underperformed in theaters. The ease of viewing movies from home has changed the way audiences decide which movies they want to see in the theater. Film critic Ali Plumb noted how the theatrical release of *Booksmart* (2019), a critically-acclaimed original film, didn’t receive much attention from moviegoers. They “didn’t feel like they had to see it at the cinema” but could “wait and watch it at home, which they couldn’t do with something like [*Avengers:*] *Endgame*” (qtd. in Horner). Big blockbusters, which are thought to be better experienced by watching them on big screens with loud surround sound systems, thrive at the box office while original films may seem better suited for home viewing via streaming services. If audiences are unsure that they will like an original, which they likely know little about, they simply choose to wait until it is available to watch online. While at home, viewers



face few consequences if they do not enjoy the film—they have not wasted a drive to the theater or paid for tickets and concessions. Even at-home time commitments are far less consequential, since it is very easy to pick up the remote and stop watching a movie if the viewers don't want to watch the whole thing. This realization has affected the operations of streaming services themselves. Companies like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu have even begun producing original movies, television shows, and mini-series that are available for streaming exclusively on their individual platforms. This proves that original content has not fully gone extinct—rather, their creators are adapting to the demands and desires of audiences.

The future of original films is uncertain. Current trends indicate that they may be sequestered to streaming services, rarely appearing on the big screen again, unless changes are made. However, it seems that audiences may be growing tired of steady streams of sequels, as demonstrated by the *Divergent* franchise which is based on the books by Veronica Roth. The third film in the series, *Allegiant* (2016), only grossed half of what the second and first films made domestically. It was such a flop that the concluding film of the series, *Ascendant*, which was planned to forego a theatrical release and be shown only on television, was eventually canceled (Wilson)..

The future of original films may be especially moldable as the film industry and theater chains return to normal operations following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In an opinion editorial, one director argued that “when this crisis passes, the need for collective human engagement, the need to live and love and laugh and cry together”—a need that will urge audiences into theaters—“will be more powerful than ever” (Nolan). As the industry recovers, the movie preferences of audiences could heavily influence the types of motion pictures Hollywood makes moving forward. If original films begin experiencing greater success and

profitability, studios would likely follow suit by producing many more and granting them larger budgets.

As shown by movie earnings in recent years, originals have fierce competition; the game is rigged against them. They need support so that they can share time on the big screen with sequels and receive equal opportunities for success. One director emphasized that, “we protect the smaller films that aren’t four-quadrant mega-releases” and “find ways to get people into theaters for movies other than the giant event movies,” which could be achieved if the film industry were to better encourage audiences to take risks on original films (Abrams). Studios could, for example, invest more into advertising their releases, or negotiate with theaters to offer lower ticket prices for original movies. Doing so could potentially draw larger audiences into those screenings, giving them an opportunity to compete with familiar films that are seen by moviegoers as low-risk investments. It could also make sense to embrace current trends and give original films a marketplace of their own, which could be accomplished by adding fewer sequels and remakes to the catalogs of streaming services, or even by establishing websites or movie theaters that exclusively show original films.

However, change is usually slow. It is unlikely that any number of complaints or suggestions will cause movie studios to depart from their existing profitable formulae of sequels until these concerns are reflected in the box office. In Hollywood, ticket sales speak louder than critiques. For too long, moviegoers have let original motion pictures suffer, opting instead to fulfill their desires for familiarity. It is time for audiences to take risks on original movies. When studios see an increase in original films’ revenues, they will hopefully adjust to current trends. If original films are not given the financial backing that they desperately need, audiences will become more familiar with films ending in ‘to be continued’ than ‘happily ever after.’

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