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German Audiences and Hollywood Remakes: Attitudes and Memories

Kathleen Loock
Leibniz University Hannover, DEU

Stefan Dierkes
Leibniz University Hannover, DEU

Abstract

This article presents findings from a mixed-methods research project that examines the significance of Hollywood movies in the everyday lives of global viewers and probes whether film remakes shape experiences of time, age, and generational belonging. The case study focuses on German audience members. Respondents participated in an online questionnaire and group interviews about their film-viewing habits as well as their memories, experiences, and attitudes regarding Hollywood movies, with particular attention to the practice of cinematic remaking. This article focuses specifically on Hollywood remakes, highlighting how audiences engage with repetition and variation in film consumption. We argue that an interdisciplinary methodology at the intersection of audience research, remake studies, and memory studies can offer valuable insights into contemporary audience formations. Our aim is to help lay the groundwork for a global practice of remake studies and to shape the research field by introducing audience research as a productive approach to analysing and understanding the reception of film remakes within specific national contexts.

Keywords: Hollywood cinema, Memory, Remake studies, Qualitative audience research, Germany

Author contact: kathleen.loock@engsem.uni-hannover.de; stefan.dierkes@engsem.uni-hannover.de

Introduction

Film remakes are as old as cinema itself. Relying on a serial dynamic of repetition and variation, they reduce risks for the studios, who can use tried-and-proven material from the past, as well as for audiences, who generally know what to expect. In contrast to supposedly 'original' movies that circulate in the same market, film remakes 'lead a highly conspicuous commercial existence in the cultural imagination' (Loock, 2024: 9). They are '*undisguised commodities*' (Kelleter, 2017: 10), 'challeng[ing] culturally valued ideas of closure and self-containment and draw[ing] attention to the profit-driven business model of the film industry' (Loock, 2024: 9). This is precisely why film remakes have long been dismissed as legitimate objects of study. In the past decades, remake scholarship has complicated such easy dismissals and tried to understand cinematic remaking as a meaningful and meaning-making industrial and cultural activity (e.g., Horton and McDougal, 1998; Forrest and Koos, 2002a; Verevis, 2006; Loock and Verevis, 2012; Klein and Palmer, 2016; Herbert, 2017; Rosewarne, 2020; Loock, 2024). Despite the growing body of scholarship on film remakes, however, we still know little about their reception.

Our larger study examines the reception of Hollywood remakes, sequels and franchises in Germany.[1] Here, we focus specifically on film remakes – more precisely on Hollywood remakes of earlier Hollywood films, rather than transnational or domestic remakes.[2] Based on a questionnaire and group interviews, we explore the accumulated long-term social and cultural meanings that Hollywood films acquire in the lives of actual viewers. Building on previous audience research, we recognise the notion of active audiences and balance our research between attention to (film) texts – how audiences interpret texts in dominant, negotiated, and oppositional ways (Hall, 1973/2019) – and their 'practices of consumption', meaning how films 'are located and understood as part of people's social and cultural practices' (Wessels, 2023: 288). This is in line with approaches promoted by the New Cinema History movement (Maltby et al., 2011; Biltereyst et al., 2019), which decentre the film itself as object of study to foreground memories, lived experiences, and social acts of film consumption. We understand film remakes as formative media objects that are biographically and media-technologically embedded in viewers' everyday lives. As such, they can 'structure the passage of time over many years and decades by providing economic, aesthetic, and cultural reference points' that are not only relevant for how the film business understands its own development and cinema itself records the many shifts and changes it has undergone, but also for audiences, who 'come to recognize and position themselves within a longer historical trajectory' (Loock, 2024: 10-11).

If we accept that remaking functions as such 'a mode of timekeeping' (Loock, 2024: 6), providing temporal markers throughout life stages, we also need to look at audience

[1] The German case study is part of the larger 'Hollywood Memories' project that is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and investigates audience reception of Hollywood remakes, sequels, and franchises in Germany, Mexico, China, and the United States: https://hollywood-memories.com/en/.

[2] This focus reflects the distinction between diachronic and synchronic remaking (Loock, 2019: 326-327, 2024: 5-6): diachronic remakes repeatedly recycle the same storytelling material over decades within the same national context, whereas synchronic remakes produce foreign-language versions often shortly after the release of the original film. Put simply, movies that are remade multiple times in the same national context already have a past there and raise different questions than transnational remakes, which foreground cultural translation and global power dynamics. By focusing on Hollywood's diachronic remakes, we examine how films with an established industrial and cultural history are received in Germany, and how they mobilise memory, affect, and generational identification.

engagement with film remakes beyond cinemagoing experiences to include home viewing contexts, repeat viewing, and the uses of different media formats (television, VHS, DVD, and online streaming platforms). Here, our project follows recent studies that identify 'a pressing need […] to consider audiences and their non-theatrical viewership through the same or equivalent approaches, concepts, methods, and sociocultural foci that are employed to past cinemagoing' (Egan et al., 2022: 10; see also Nedyalkova, 2022: 62; Kuhn et al., 2017: 11). In this article, we focus on attitudes and memories that German audience members associate with film remakes. The qualitative analysis of their responses provides a glimpse at the affective power of Hollywood films. We will first discuss the role of audience research and memory in the field of remake studies, then introduce the national context and methods of our German case study, and finally present our findings.

Audience Research, Remake Studies, and *Hollywood Memories*

For Eduard Cuelenaere (2021: 233), the field of remake studies 'lags behind' adaptation studies and other research fields when it comes to audience research. This means that remake studies (like adaptation studies before it) often seems stuck in fidelity discourses and comparative analyses that posit 'original' against remake. But even when remake studies engages critically with 'notions of hierarchy, originality, and fidelity' (Cuelenaere, 2021: 238), there remains a discrepancy between the scholars' definitions and theoretical models on the one hand and the ways in which audiences consume or make sense of remakes in their specific cultural and historical context on the other. Matt Hills (2005) and Laura Mee (2017), for example, have shown that fidelity and a hierarchical understanding of 'original' and remake effectively determine the reception contexts for horror film fans and the cultural value they associate with the horror film remake. In his study of Dutch-Flemish film remakes (i.e., monolingual remakes), Cuelenaere (2021) found that his Dutch and Flemish focus groups could not agree on a single definition of the remake but generally preferred the 'original' (even if this sometimes clashed with preferences for their local versions). What is still missing from these endeavours into audience research, are studies that consider the role of remaking – understood as a broad category that includes different forms of iteration, from film remakes to sequels and franchises (Loock, 2024) – in constructing and maintaining memory systems. A concept that is central for thinking through these ideas is *Hollywood memories*.

Hollywood memories signals an interest in both the individual recollections of audience members and their collective sociocultural contexts of remembering certain films, characters, storyworlds, and stars. This links the project to cultural memory studies, a research field concerned with 'the interplay of present and past in sociocultural contexts' (Erll, 2008: 2). According to Astrid Erll (2008: 5), 'no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts', while institutions, media, and cultural practices work to construct a shared past that social groups can remember. Visual culture has a particularly powerful constitutive relevance for both individual and collective memory, especially through film. Cultural memory studies' greatest methodological challenge, however, is the critical investigation of actual reception practices to gain insights into how film (and other media) shape conceptions of history (Erll, 2005/2017) and how they engage with personal and social memories of audiences. In film studies, meanwhile, a growing number of historical reception studies relate cinema to cultural memory (Stacey, 1994; Kuhn, 2002; Biltereyst et al., 2012; Van de Vijver and Biltereyst, 2013; Treveri Gennari, 2018). Building on existing concepts from

cultural memory studies within the context of audience research, our study attempts to productively advance both directions.

Hollywood memories is a concept that describes mnemonic processes, in which fictional narratives and images of Hollywood films become thoroughly entangled with lived experiences in specific historical and cultural contexts. Viewers are likely to link memories of films to certain life stages (childhood, youth, adulthood, late life), social practices and spaces (going to the movies, watching at home, with different media technologies, with family or friends), and broader cultural and geopolitical reception contexts. The concept of *Hollywood memorie*s suggests that, over time, film remakes serve as memory prompts that synchronise the ongoing narrative and technological evolution embodied by the films with the viewers' own lived experiences and aging process. With the theoretical foundation of *Hollywood memories* in mind, our study is concerned with German audiences, who belong to the Western market and are likely to share pop-cultural repertoires, reception practices, as well as memories of and sentimental attachments to films and franchises with viewers from other Western national and cultural contexts. Still, it is necessary to establish the economic, geopolitical, and cultural power relations between the United States and Germany, and, in particular, the role of Hollywood in Germany, before turning to our case study.

US-German Relations and Hollywood in Germany

After World War II, the United States played a major role in the occupation, reconstruction, and re-education of West Germany, which, in time, became an important US ally during the Cold War. Because of the powerful American impact on the post-war German economy, society, and culture, Germany is generally considered to be the most 'Americanized' country in Western Europe (Junker et al., 2004). US military officials 'worked towards decentralization and de-Nazification' of the German film industry (Brockmann, 2010: 192) by breaking up the film monopoly of the UFA production company, which had been nationalised under the Nazi regime (Brockmann, 2010: 137). Further, West Germany was not allowed to implement policies and quotas to control Hollywood imports because the United States aimed to establish Germany as an emerging export market (Scheunemann, 2008: 82).

German debates on the influences of US popular culture have long been marked by ambivalence, oscillating between critiques of cultural imperialism and accounts of active appropriation and democratisation (Fluck, 2004). In the postwar period, the Frankfurt School formulated a powerful critique of Hollywood cinema as part of a standardised 'culture industry', articulated most influentially in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947/2016), a position that informed broader suspicions toward American capitalism and mass culture in West Germany. At the same time, later scholarship has emphasised how American popular culture was locally negotiated and incorporated into everyday life rather than passively consumed (Maase, 1992; Fluck, 2004). From a Bourdieusian perspective, these tensions can also be understood in terms of shifting taste hierarchies and struggles over cultural legitimacy, in which Hollywood cinema has been alternately devalued as mass culture and embraced as a source of emancipation and popular pleasure. Acknowledging this broader cultural and ideological context is important for understanding attitudes toward Hollywood cinema in Germany. However, rather than revisiting debates on cultural imperialism, taste hierarchies, or political economy, our article focuses on the role of memory, familiarity, and affect in shaping audience attitudes toward

Hollywood remakes, foregrounding how attachments to characters, stars, and storyworlds mediate their reception.

While Hollywood films have traditionally outnumbered domestic productions on the German release schedules in the postwar era, audiences tended to prefer watching German films in the cinema (Garncarz, 1994, 2013). It was not until the mid-1970s that Hollywood began to lead the box-office charts in Germany, reducing the market share of German movies from almost 50% in 1970 to less than 20% in 1972 (Duvvuri, 2007: 48). Over the next five decades, these proportions remained consistent, with Hollywood movies routinely accounting for approximately 70–80% of the annual box-office attendance (Brockmann, 2010; Baer, 2021). While Thomas Guback (1969) and Thomas Elsaesser (1994) attributed the popularity of Hollywood movies to the superior financial capabilities of the US film industry, Joseph Garncarz (2013) underscored the significant role of evolving technological affordances and shifting audience demographics. As television sets became more widespread in West Germany, the number of cinemagoers rapidly declined. In the 1950s, approximately 700–800 million tickets were sold annually, but by the early 1970s, this figure had plummeted to around 200 million tickets (Garncarz, 2013: 126). The media-technological shift that made watching movies at home possible also resulted in a different cinemagoing demographic: audiences became younger, and they preferred Hollywood movies. If 58% of the German cinema audience was aged thirty and younger in the 1950s, the number had risen to 86% by the early 1970s (Garncarz, 2013: 145).[3] Hollywood films profited from nation-wide distribution and the cultural proximity of young German audiences. Moreover, the hero-driven US films that defined the 1970s and 1980s (*Star Wars* [dir. George Lucas, US, 1977-], *Rambo* [*First Blood*, dir. Ted Kotcheff, US, 1982], or *Back to the Future* [dir. Robert Zemeckis, US, 1985) resonated well with the younger viewers (Garncarz, 2013: 175).

Since 1982, the new conservative government redirected German film funding to support more commercially viable projects (Baer, 2021: 54). These market-friendly policies, however, failed to boost the market share of German films. The crisis – intensified by home video technologies, declining audience attendance, and Hollywood's growing box-office dominance – was not uniquely German. Yet, while other European countries, especially France, responded with protectionist measures such as import quotas, German cultural policy embraced 'a new era of deregulation of the media industries, including film and television' (Baer, 2021: 49). US imports continued to dominate the German box office: in the 1990s, domestic productions accounted for only around 10% of the market share, while Hollywood films reached 80–90% (Prommer, 2018: 160). Since the 2000s, domestic films have gained popularity, climbing to 20–25% per year (FFA, 2025), driven by high-profile comedies like *Der Schuh des Manitu* (dir. Michael Herbig, DEU, 2001), *Keinohrhasen* (dir. Til Schweiger, DEU, 2007), or the *Fack Ju Göhte* trilogy (dir. Bora Dağtekin, DEU, 2013-2017), and films dealing with the national history like *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, DEU, 2003), *Der Untergang* (dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel, DEU/ITA/AUT, 2004), or *Das Leben der Anderen* (dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, DEU, 2006).

Despite the increased popularity of domestic productions, Hollywood films continue to claim 60–70% of the German box office. We suggest that this dominance is closely intertwined with Hollywood production strategies, particularly practices of cinematic remaking and serial storytelling. While German remakes of German films enjoyed considerable popularity in the 1950s (Frank, 2017), contemporary remaking in the German market has become largely

[3] Although the percentage of cinema audience under thirty is currently at an all-time low with 36% in 2024 (FFA, 2025), Hollywood films still account for 60–70% of the German box office.

associated with Hollywood cinema. Of the 273 US movies that appeared on Germany's annual top ten lists of highest-grossing movies between 1990 and 2025, 55% were remakes, sequels, or spin-offs of pre-existing films.[4] From 2010 to 2025, this share rose to 75% (Figure 1). Such numbers confirm the industrial importance of Hollywood remaking and serialisation to box-office success and suggest that German audiences' sustained attachment to familiar American characters, stars, and storyworlds plays a key role in this dominance. It is precisely this dynamic that our study seeks to explore from an audience perspective.

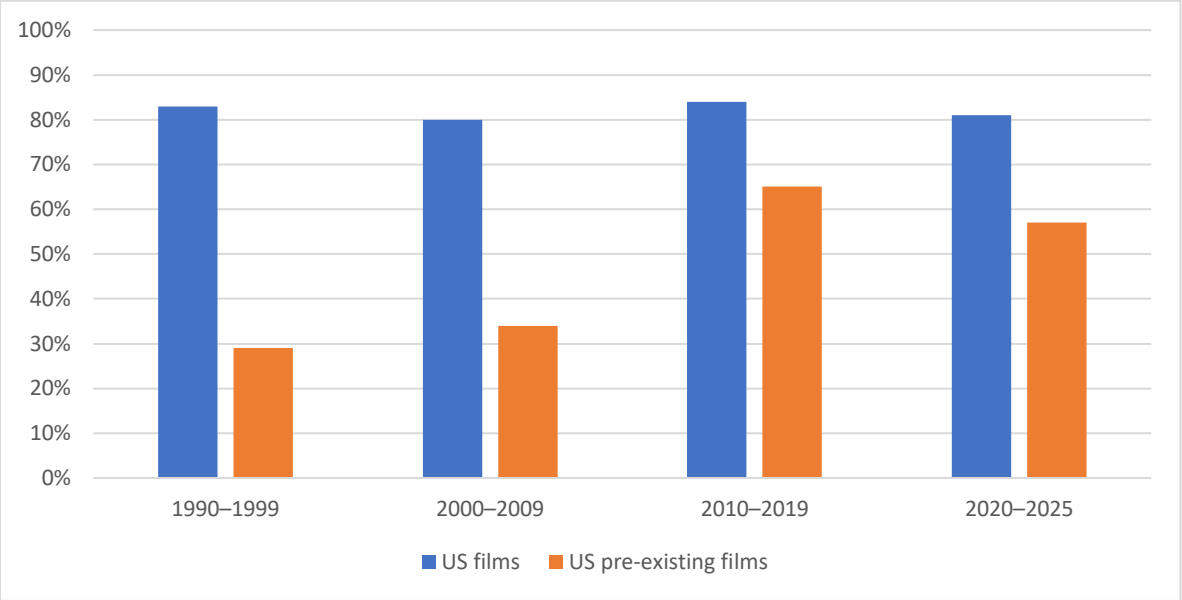


Figure 1: Percentage of US films and pre-existing films in German Top Ten (1990–2025).

Methods

Based on the theoretical assumptions and the German context, we designed a mixed-methods approach using a questionnaire and a semi-structured guide for group interviews with the intent of bridging the qualitative-quantitative divide in audience research (Mathieu et al., 2015: 294). Because the COVID-19 pandemic made personal, face-to-face contact with our participants difficult, we rented the digital research platform *Kernwert* for the duration of the study, from March to June 2022. Participants needed to sign up for the study on our project website and then received a login link to access the *Kernwert* platform. Among the advantages of using a digital research platform like *Kernwert* are its wider geographical reach, the ability to conduct our research without travel, and the flexibility it offers in terms of design and materials. But working with the platform also required us to rethink how to recruit (especially older) participants, how to sustain engagement, and how to conduct group interviews online. Potential drawbacks included technological barriers for older participants, reduced engagement due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, and additional costs.

[4] Based on the Top 100 highest-grossing movies in Germany, published annually by the German Federal Film Board (FFA). Excluding adaptations.

Altogether 130 people participated in the German case study. Seventy-eight identified as female (60%), fifty-two as male (40%); they were between twenty and seventy-nine years old. 35% of the participants were aged twenty–twenty-nine, 22% aged thirty–thirty-nine, 15% aged forty–forty-nine, 9% aged fifty–fifty-nine while the remaining 19% were aged sixty and older (Table 1). While our sample is diverse in terms of age, household income, and professional status, most of the participants had an above-average level of education. The sample is not meant to be representative for the German population but instead aims to show differences and commonalities in German moviegoing audiences. In addition to completing the online questionnaire, thirty participants took part in ten semi-structured group interviews.

Table 1: General sample description.

Gender	
Male	40%
Female	60%
Non-binary	0%
Age	
20–29	35%
30–39	22%
40–49	15%
50–59	9%
60 and older	19%
Education	
Intermediate secondary school leaving certificate (*Realschulabschluss*)	5%
Higher education entrance qualification (*Abitur*)	27%
University degree	67%
'Prefer not to say'	2%
Professional Status	
Employee	44%
Self-Employed	2%
Student	34%
Retired	13%
Other or 'Prefer not to say'	7%
Net Household Income	
less than 850€	7%
851–1.750€	16%
1.751–2.750€	16%
2.751–3.750€	16%
3.751–4.750€	8%
4.750–6.000€	9%
more than 6.000€	7%
'Do not know' or 'Prefer not to say'	20%

The questionnaire was divided into five parts that moved from first movie memories to the familiarity with Hollywood movies and viewing behaviour to sections dedicated to film remakes, sequels, and franchises. In line with our research focus, the questionnaire and interview prompts directed the focus to Hollywood films that had been remade, continued, expanded, or revised within Hollywood. Still, we found that it was important to start with more general questions in order to mobilise the respondents' movie memories, which then usually also enabled them to recall memories of specific film remakes at a later stage in the questionnaire. In the film remakes section, we first introduced a broad definition of 'film remake' to ensure participants understood the concept and then asked our respondents whether they remembered any Hollywood remakes they had recently watched. Next, they had to choose Hollywood remakes they were familiar with from a list of twenty-five film posters released since 2000 (Figure 2).[5] We also asked whether they had watched one or more older versions of these films. In this way, we tested both the respondents' familiarity with Hollywood remakes and prepared them for the following two open-ended questions. We asked our respondents to share memories they associated with a specific remake and to tell us what they thought of Hollywood remakes in general. In these open-ended questions, respondents could give a wider range of answers and express opinions, views, and experiences in their own words (cf. Döring et al., 2016: 358).[6]

[5] The posters were used as illustrative examples to facilitate recall and discussion rather than to delimit a fixed corpus or exhaust the range of films participants could draw on. They were explicitly invited to mention additional remakes beyond those shown, and several did so. The posters included: *Ocean's Eleven* (dir. Steven Soderbergh, US, 2001), *Planet of the Apes* (dir. Tim Burton, US, 2001), *Mr. Deeds* (dir. Steven Brill, US, 2002), *Freaky Friday* (dir. Mark Waters, US, 2003), *King Kong* (dir. Peter Jackson, NZL/US, 2005), *War of the Worlds* (dir. Steven Spielberg, US, 2005), *Poseidon* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, US, 2006), The *Invasion* (dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel, US, 2007), *I Am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence, US, 2007), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Scott Derrickson, US, 2008), *Friday, the 13th* (dir. Marcus Nispel, US, 2009), *The Karate Kid* (dir. Harald Zwart, US/CHN, 2010), *True Grit* (dir. Ethan and Joel Coen, US, 2010), *Footloose* (dir. Craig Brewer, US, 2011), *Total Recall* (dir. Len Wiseman, US, 2012), *Carrie* (dir. Kimberly Peirce, US, 2013), *Evil Dead* (dir. Fede Álvarez, US, 2013), *Point Break* (dir. Ericson Core, US/DEU/CHN, 2015), *Ben-Hur* (dir. Timur Bekmambetov, US, 2016), *Ghostbusters: Answer the Call* (dir. Paul Feig, US, 2016), *Kong: Skull Island* (dir. Jordan Vogt-Roberts, US, 2017), *The Mummy* (dir. Alex Kurtzman, US, 2017), *It* (dir. Andy Muschietti, US, 2017), *A Star is Born* (dir. Bradley Cooper, US, 2018), *Dune* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, US, 2021).

[6] The same set of questions were also asked with regard to film sequels and franchises. While a systematic comparison between attitudes and memories towards remakes and sequels transcends the scope of this article, our data suggests notable differences. Participants' responses to sequels tended to be marked by more detailed memories and stronger anticipatory and affective attachments, often linked to narrative continuity, immersion in an established storyworld, and ritualised viewing practices. These findings suggest that remakes and sequels engage memory and affect differently and therefore merit closer comparative analysis.

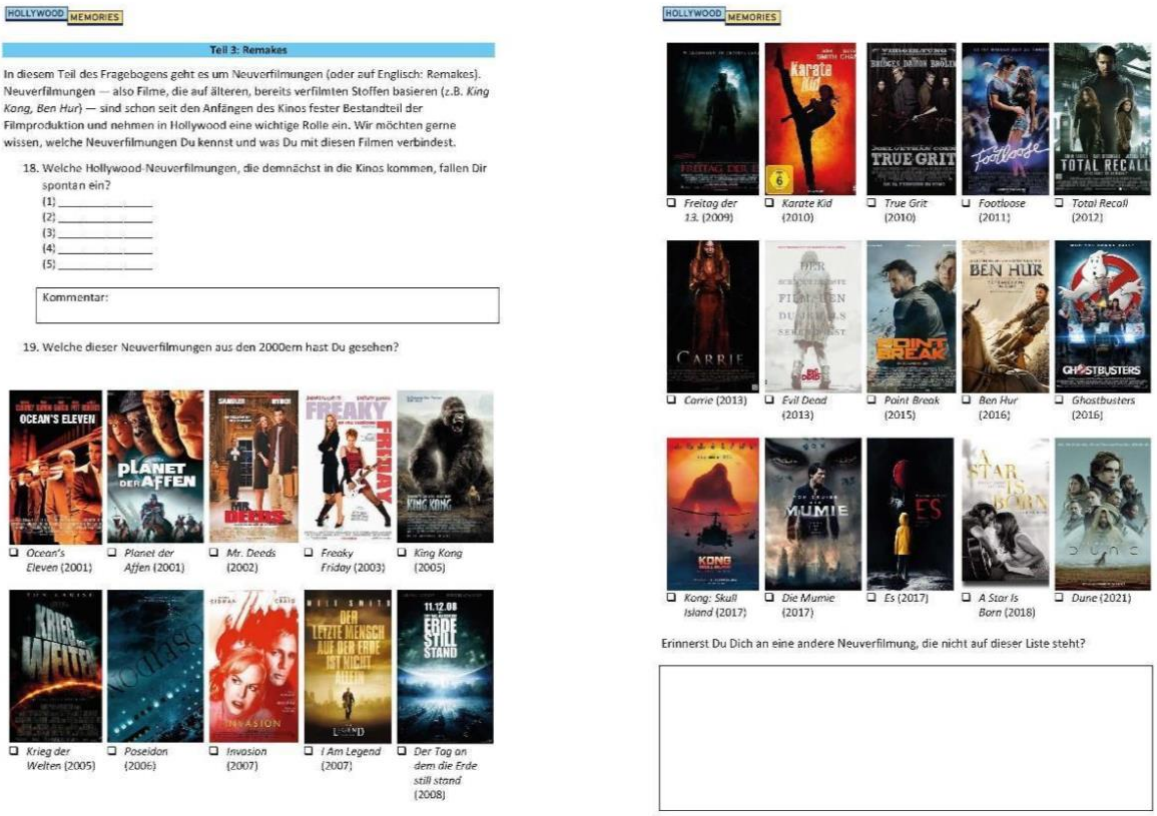


Figure 2: Questionnaire with remake posters.

Themes and patterns that emerged in the questionnaire responses informed many of the group interview discussions, which were conducted to deepen and contextualise the questionnaire findings and to 'capture the audience's process of constructing and reconstructing the past in the present' (Treveri Gennari, 2018: 41). The group interviews were conducted with the research platform's video conference tool. All participants agreed to enable their webcams and the fact that participants joined from private spaces (such as kitchens, living rooms, or bedrooms), may have contributed to a relaxed and conversational atmosphere. All interviews followed the same semi-structured guide with nine open-ended questions addressing familiarity with Hollywood cinema and film remakes, viewing contexts, personal experiences, as well as the integration of movies into everyday life. The questions served as prompts, encouraging participants to engage in discussions with one another. For analysing the answers, we used a data-driven, inductive coding approach (cf. Kuckartz et al., 2009: 78-79). The project was not designed to recruit fans but participants with a general interest in Hollywood movies as part of their everyday media practices. Accordingly, the study is less concerned with fandom or fan-specific attitudes toward remakes and reboots (Johnson, 2007; Proctor, 2017; Hills, 2018) than with how remakes – and their serial dynamics of repetition and variation – intersect with memory and media consumption beyond fan communities.

Findings

Familiarity with Film Remakes

During the pre-test phase, when we checked the comprehensibility of the questionnaire (Porst, 2014), we noticed that, even though many English words are widely used in German, this does not necessarily apply to 'remake', 'sequel', and 'franchise'. Older participants in particular struggled to understand these terms, even though they are common in newspapers. There are German equivalents for 'film remake' (*Neuverfilmung*) and 'sequel' (*Fortsetzungsfilm*), but not for 'franchise'. Consequently, we used the German terms for remake and sequel in the questionnaire (providing the English word in brackets), avoided 'franchise' altogether, and added short definitions. Since previous research (Cuelenaere, 2021) has shown that audiences do not agree on a single definition of 'film remake', we suggested a broad one:

> This section deals with film remakes, that is, movies that are based on older movies (for example, *King Kong*). Film remakes have been central to film production in the United States since the early days of cinema and continue to play an important role in Hollywood today. We would like to know which remakes you know and what you associate with these movies.

We found that unfamiliarity with specific English terms was less pronounced for 'remake' than for 'sequel' or 'franchise'. Lack of familiarity with the terms, however, did not mean that respondents were unfamiliar with the concepts or that they had never watched such films. For the question, 'Off the top of your head, can you think of any Hollywood remakes?', all but four respondents mentioned at least one and, some up to ten remakes. We then listed twenty-five Hollywood remakes as memory prompts, all released since 2000 and from various genres (see Figure 2, footnote 5). Each had been watched by at least one participant. Familiarity with the movies differed widely among participants: eight participants (all aged fifty and older) reported having watched none of the movies, while others had seen up to twenty. Even those who had not watched any of the films listed later remembered other remakes and shared their opinions.

On average, each participant had watched 6.6 of the twenty-five remakes, but striking age differences emerged. Participants aged twenty–twenty-nine had seen seven remakes on average, while those aged fifty and older had seen only about three. In general, the older the participants, the less familiar they were with the film remakes, though exceptions occurred across all age groups. This pattern is likely due to the later release dates (mostly after 2000) of the selected films. When asked whether they were aware that the films were remakes,[7] however, the trend reversed: only 13% of participants aged twenty–twenty-nine and 21% of those aged thirty–thirty-nine recognised that half or more of the films were remakes, compared to 50% of participants aged sixty and older. A plausible explanation is that older participants were more likely to have seen or heard about earlier versions in their youth, which made them more aware of the films' remake status. Thus, the participants' age strongly influenced the film repertoire they had acquired up to that point.

[7] Participants indicated whether they recognised (1) none, (2) less than half, (3) about half, (4) more than half, or (5) all of the films as remakes.

Attitudes Toward Film Remakes

In previous audience research, participants offered 'few positive judgements' (Cuelenaere, 2021: 246) about film remakes. Responses in our study were ambivalent and generally balanced, with both positive and negative associations regarding film remakes. Many respondents articulated what they liked and disliked about film remakes, expressing what Stuart Hall (1973/2019: 273) has called a 'negotiated' reading, containing 'a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements'.

When evaluating remakes, participants tended to immediately compare them with previous versions, usually leading to unfavourable assessments of the remakes. 'Good' remakes were regarded as exceptions to the rule. Most commonly, remakes were labelled superfluous, especially when they were perceived to closely resemble an older version or failed to add anything new from our participants' perspective. This latter criticism is also prevalent in academic and journalistic discourses (Rosewarne, 2020; Loock, 2024), suggesting how strongly debates on originality and commerciality were reproduced in audience responses. At times, however, these views shifted when affective and memory-related dimensions, such as personal experiences, came into play, as will be discussed below in the 'Film Remakes and Memories' section.

Amira (b. 1997),[8] for example, stated in the questionnaire: 'If a remake is simply a new movie with the same story and characters, I don't see any reason to watch it, and I also don't understand why it needs to be remade in the first place'.[9] This sense of a missing added value was also expressed in the group interviews: Nicole (b. 1984), who said that she was not a fan of remakes, wondered why a movie like *The Karate Kid* (dir. John G. Avildsen, US, 1984), had to be remade at all, if 'it already exists'. Another interviewee of that group, Frank (b. 1986), was curious about technological innovations but disapproved of the frequency with which some franchises released remakes. For him, *Spider-Man* stood out, because it 'was remade three or four times in the last ten years'. Frank said that he felt overwhelmed by the number of remakes and asked whether there were any original stories left. Whether it concerned text-immanent novelty (Amira), broader issues arising when remakes interfered with sentimental attachments (Nicole), or the sheer number of films and their lack of originality (Frank), several participants questioned the artistic legitimacy of remakes which, in turn, led to negative assessments.

This criticism of film remakes was often associated with a broader critique of Hollywood, namely its economically-driven production context. Laura (b. 1995) stated in the questionnaire:

> I tend to be sceptical of remakes because they often don't add anything new to the story and often feel like cash grabs (e.g., the newer version of *Carrie* with Chloe Grace Moretz). I watched the movie alone on television. I remember being very disappointed because I really like the 1976 version and the remake just felt like a generic horror movie and was boring.

In the questionnaire, Paul (b. 1999) also connected what he perceived as a lack of creativity to the financial imperative of film remakes: 'Why should you remake a film that's already

[8] We have anonymised the participants' real names.
[9] We translated all participant quotes from German to English.

good, if you don't do it with the intention to improve certain elements? (I'm of course aware that money is a big motivation behind it)'. The distinction between a 'well-written' story and the film industry's financial motives suggests that viewers accept art as a commercial business, provided they are not constantly reminded of its profit-driven nature. Hollywood's profit principle was criticised only when our participants considered a remake to be an aesthetic failure. If they praised remakes, however, they rarely mentioned economic factors and focused on the films' aesthetic qualities instead.

The Ideal of Originality

In the questionnaire, the participants' negative views of remakes were connected to an ideal of originality. It was more difficult to legitimise the existence of a remake, if it could not offer something 'new' or 'radically different'. Jan-Anton (b. 1994), for instance, responded: 'In general, I think that remakes are a tried and tested method of making money out of known IPs [intellectual properties], without bothering to invent something original'. Remakes are positioned in opposition to originality here, as participants blamed them for preventing the production of similarly high-profile 'original' movies. Similar sentiments prevailed in many responses, echoing the prevalent film-critical and academic discourse that pits originality against repetition (cf. Eco, 1985; also Loock, 2024).

Our participants also showed a clear preference for the 'original' movie. Their responses indicate that they expected film remakes to strike the right balance between originality and derivativeness. This rhetoric, too, is prominent in film criticism and academic research on film remakes. Writing about the neo-romantic conception of art that he found prevalent in the 1980s, Umberto Eco (1985: 161) argued that audiences demanded from art 'a new way of looking at the world', a sense of artistry, inventiveness, or novelty. He explored how this ideal was negotiated in an 'era of repetition' (Eco, 1985: 167). However, as Laura Mee writes, such an understanding of art

> not only risks judging viewers who appreciate both the recycled and the popular, but also fails to grasp the commercial nature of cinema, which is often ignored in favour of the presumed originality […] as if the two sides were mutually exclusive. (Mee, 2017: 196)

Nevertheless, many of the responses exhibit an idealisation of originality, complementing previous findings (Hills, 2005; Mee, 2017; Cuelenaere, 2021), which argue that a hierarchical understanding of 'original' and remake affects reception, especially if audiences have watched the 'original' first.

The order in which viewers encounter a source film and its remake(s) impacts their assessment of the movies' artistic quality. In the questionnaire, Linus (b. 1995) and Helene (b. 1995) reported that they really liked *Ocean's Eleven* (Soderbergh, 2001) and *A Star is Born* (Cooper, 2018) but were unaware that these were remakes. Understanding of originality, then, depends on the viewer's awareness of at least two versions. Participants who were aware of a remake's status frequently drew comparisons to one or more older versions. By contrast, those who were unaware, or realised only afterward that it was a remake, usually assessed the remake more positively and regarded the film as an original, 'stand-alone' movie: 'I think, if you don't know the original, it just feels like a new movie' (Paula, b. 2000).

This missing prefiguration is something Linda Hutcheon (2013: 120) has noted regarding adaptations: 'If we do not know that what we are experiencing actually *is* an adaptation […] we simply experience the adaptation as we would any other work'. The same applies to remakes: attitudes toward them were shaped first by whether or not participants had watched the predecessor, and second by which version they had seen first, since memories associated with that first viewing experience influenced their judgments (Cuelenaere, 2021).

Updating the Past

In contrast to these negative assessments and oppositional readings of remakes, many responses also included positive aspects, reflecting a 'preferred' reading of remakes. Oliver Lindner (2015: 27) has noted that 'updating a story is a central characteristic of any remake', and we can add that this is also the feature our participants enjoyed most about remakes. We identified three types of updates from their responses: socio-political, narrative, and technological.

Regarding socio-political updates, our participants appreciated how cultural change – often framed in terms of progress – was woven into a remake's storyline. Several people noted that they liked how remakes 'transferred' stories into the present and renewed the relevance of specific themes. In the questionnaire, Nicole (b. 1984) found remakes interesting when they 'adapt [the story] to the *zeitgeist*', and Steffi (b. 2000) wrote that remakes could 'erase past mistakes', although it was unclear whether she referred to plot holes or cultural sensibilities. Participants also valued narrative updates, i.e., when the same story was told 'from a different perspective' or brought 'a breath of fresh air' to a familiar tale. Fabian (b. 1984), for example, considered Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight trilogy (US/UK, 2005-2012) a successful remake of the Batman narrative, because it was 'more gritty, realistic, dystopian, and fitting for that time'. These responses suggest that remakes can invite viewers to reflect on how well films align with the current *zeitgeist* and the participants' lived experiences, highlighting the role of personal and social contexts for film appreciation.

Technological updates were another source of enjoyment. Our participants praised remakes that told stories 'with the means of modern technology' (Sonja, b. 1982). Several, like Jan (b. 1989), specifically mentioned Disney's live-action remakes, appreciating the 'better and more realistic' renditions made possible as 'technology and thus possibilities evolve'. In one group interview, Maja (b. 1985) similarly noted her 'appreciation of better special effects', and Frank (b. 1986) agreed, referring to the *Godzilla* franchise: 'If you compare it with the original, where a plastic figure runs through some small diorama cities, it has definitively become more impressive'. All statements focusing on technological updates draw direct comparisons to previous film versions, presenting the remakes as 'better', 'more realistic', and 'more impressive'. For our participants, these technological enhancements not only made the films visually more impressive but also reinforced the sense that remakes could indeed refresh familiar stories for contemporary audiences. This 'new technology' rationale is, of course, one of the key motivations – and justification narratives – behind the production of remakes (Forrest and Koos, 2002b: 3-4; Verevis, 2006: 17; Loock, 2024).

Film Remakes and Memories

Film remakes and memories are intricately linked because film remakes have the potential to evoke memories of formative media experiences (Loock, 2024: 105). They can operate as a

catalyst for intertextual memories as they 'remember earlier versions of themselves (through the restaging of iconic scenes, flashbacks, cameo appearances, etc.) and self-reflexively comment on the condition of their own existence as follow-up to their respective predecessors' (Loock, 2024: 14). More importantly, however, film remakes conjure extratextual memories, carrying meanings of a 'specific media-historical and cultural moment' (Loock, 2024: 14). Audiences do not only have memories 'contained within the movies themselves' but also memories associated 'with the era in which the movies were first released, and with their own personal lives at the time' (Loock, 2024: 84).

Our participants frequently addressed the ways remakes can bring back memories on both personal and collective levels. In the questionnaire, Imke (b. 1978) wrote, 'oftentimes, the memory of the old movies gets lost and then remakes can be very helpful'. Mark (b. 1981) thought that remakes 'are useful for lesser-known movies' like *Nightmare Alley* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, US/MEX/CAN, 2021) 'because they invite you to re-discover previously unknown movies of the past'. For many participants, remakes functioned as mnemonic devices, refreshing memories of having watched one or more predecessors. This can be a source of pleasure, as Patrick (b. 1987) notes: 'If they are made well, they can cause a hype and revive memories and emotions'.

However, watching remakes also triggered unpleasant memories, nostalgic longings, and feelings of loss among our participants, most notably when they were in their mid-thirties or older. In one interview, Hubert (b. 1952) thought that his first viewing experiences were particularly memorable and that remakes would always come off worse in comparison: 'What I watched first, that's stored in my memory and that stays'. This sentiment was shared by Imke (b. 1978) in the same interview, leading her to categorically avoid remakes of favourite movies like *Dirty Dancing* (dir. Emile Ardolino, US, 1987) because she feared that they would distort her childhood memories. These responses highlight how remakes are entangled with formative memories that, even after many years, resonate and influence judgments.

The importance of first viewing experiences is also central to Cuelenaere's (2021: 246) study. While he focuses on synchronic remakes, i.e., remakes produced at roughly the same time as their predecessors (Loock, 2019: 326-327), the first viewing experience is equally important for the kind of diachronic remaking that interests us here. Diachronic remaking generally extends over many years and decades and therefore operates differently in terms of memory and sentimental attachments (Loock, 2019: 326). In these cases, first viewing experiences are often tied to film versions that stand in for a specific cultural and media-historical moment and frequently occur during the formative years of adolescence and early adulthood, when 'people's attitudes towards entertainment are formed' (Routledge, 2016: 39). In this sense, remakes work like 'little time machines', taking 'viewers on a journey into the past' (Loock, 2024: 84) and helping them 'recapture an idealized time from our personal history' (Rosewarne, 2020: 82).

While psychologist Clay Routledge (2016: 39) suggests that '[e]xposure to stimuli that remind people of films from their youth may thus inspire nostalgia and consumption of products associated with these films', the statements above indicate a hesitation or aversion to watching remakes of favourite movies because the movie – or the memories of watching it – are so emotionally charged (cf. Gray, 2021). In most responses, the dislike of remakes was connected to memories associated with earlier movies that were threatened to be overwritten by a new version, suggesting a link between the emotional resonance of the memory and the viewer's attitude towards a remake.

If our participants were familiar with an earlier version, they usually expressed strong feelings toward the remake. Participant responses suggest that age plays a role in reception behaviour: the older the participants, the more likely they were to express a desire to avoid remakes. Karla (b. 1968), for instance, wrote in the questionnaire: 'I think most remakes are unnecessary and I don't watch them, especially if I know the original'. These attitudes were sometimes directly connected to memories of the social practice of cinemagoing. In the questionnaire, Dagmar (b. 1955) wrote that she 'rather remembers the original version. Back in the days, movies were a real highlight, especially when you saw them in the cinema'. Her response establishes a temporal hierarchy that distinguishes between older and modern films. While she criticises the quality of remakes, the answer also foregrounds how emotions shape memories of watching movies in youth. Her inability to enjoy contemporary films as much as she did in the past suggests an *emotional gap* between the remake and its predecessor, caused by the strong resonance of her initial viewing.

Other participants were reluctant to watch remakes of movies they cherished. Nicole (b. 1984) responded in the questionnaire: 'For classics, that you know and hold dear and have a connection with (*The Karate Kid* – or there's a new *Dirty Dancing* – even the poster is awful) I wouldn't want to see the remake, because I'd have prejudices'. In one of the group interviews, Theresa (b. 1995) expressed a similar reluctance about the most recent version of *Charlie's Angels* (dir. Elizabeth Banks, US, 2019): 'Something was holding me back, because then I thought "Nah, it won't come close to the original anyway"'. While these two comments anticipate the remake's failure to recapture the memory and emotional experience, Alexandra's (b. 2000) response about the live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* (dir. Bill Condon, US, 2017) shows how significant the emotional response can be for the reception of a remake:

> I saw the remake with a friend in 2017 at the cinema. The film was good, there's really nothing to criticize, but emotionally, the movie didn't affect me nearly as much as the original. *Beauty and the Beast* is one of my favourite Disney movies. The film brings back feelings of comfort, nostalgia, and childhood memories, none of which the remake was able to evoke. I also find live-action remakes not as beautiful as animated movies, without being able to name a specific reason for it.

Watching the animated movie is connected to childhood memories, but the remake fails to generate the same affirmative feelings as comfort and nostalgia. This suggests that the accumulated individual memories associated with first viewing experiences – as they often occurred in the participants' formative years – can be perceived as almost sacred, so powerful that they hinder the enjoyment of a remake. Viewers' attachments to these formative experiences imbue the original with an enduring emotional significance, creating a high threshold for later versions to be appreciated on their own terms.

When participants lacked strong sentimental attachments to an earlier film, or discussed remakes in general, they were less critical, further highlighting the influence of memories on their attitudes toward films. In the same group interview, Imke (b. 1978) returned to the topic of remakes and 'confessed' her ambivalence about them. While rejecting the idea of a new *Dirty Dancing*, she was 'very interested' in Kenneth Branagh's interpretation of *Death on the Nile* (US, 2022) and eagerly awaited its cinematic release. In this case, the 'original' version of *Death on the Nile* (dir. John Guillermin, UK, 1978) she

referred to was much older and had never made such a lasting impression on her as *Dirty Dancing*.

Without a formative first viewing experience, participants were less concerned about remakes and their potential to overwrite or devalue the original. This, in turn, reduced the challenge to their sense of self. In such cases, our participants tended to understand the remake as a game that works according to certain rules, as Maja's (b. 1985) response exemplifies, when asked in a group interview how she would feel about a remake of a favourite film from her childhood and youth:

> Well, mixed. [...] on the one hand there is a lot of nostalgia and also a kind of appreciation for better special effects, also for hidden little games and hints to the earlier film, references. But at the same time, of course, there's also a bit of disappointment, because you can't really get that childhood and youth feeling of uhhh now the first time in the cinema and a big thing and, as I said, posters from *Bravo* and, well, I mean, that simply can't play along emotionally. So that's why it's always such a strange mixture of anticipation, appreciation, nostalgia, but also always a bit of disappointment and so yes okay but of course it's not exactly the same.

Maja weighs both negative and positive aspects in her response. On the level of film (where a remake reproduces an earlier film), the tension between repetition and innovation makes the remake appealing, as she notes in terms of nostalgia, intertextual references, and improved special effects. On the emotional level, however, this dynamic reverses: despite the repetition on the screen, the remake cannot reproduce the original viewing experience and the associated emotions and memories (the cinema visit, the posters, or the German youth magazine *Bravo*). While our participants often judged remakes by how well they updated a prior version, they generally lacked the emotional resonance of the original because they could not replicate these formative experiences.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this article highlight the strong affective power Hollywood remakes can exert in the lives of actual audiences. Despite the overwhelmingly negative assessments found in academic and journalistic discourses, film remakes elicited more ambivalent reactions among our German participants. Most expressed mixed feelings when considering Hollywood remakes both in general and in relation to specific films. For them, the remake's allure lay in the tension between repetition and innovation. They praised remakes for technological, socio-cultural, and narrative updates, yet the order in which different versions were watched played a decisive role in shaping whether our participants liked or disliked a remake. This effect of the 'first viewing' experience is especially pronounced for formative films – those watched during childhood or adolescence – when strong sentimental attachments were forged.

The findings suggest that audience research can contribute to remake studies by understanding remakes as meaningful media objects that are anchored in the biographical, media, and everyday social contexts of viewers. The analysis demonstrates the central role of memory and emotion in remake reception, moving beyond traditional discourses on fidelity.

Drawing on cultural memory studies, this study further confirms that film remakes become temporal markers that audiences use to make sense of technological, narrative, and cultural developments (cf. Loock, 2024). The detailed responses from questionnaires and interviews reveal the complexity of attitudes and memories associated with cinematic remaking. Because of their high production values and overtly commercial nature, remakes ultimately evoke a mix of often conflicting and ambivalent feelings and experiences that need to be further investigated, including in comparison to sequels and franchises and across different national audience contexts.

Biographical Note

Kathleen Loock is Professor of American Studies and Media Studies at Leibniz Universität Hannover. She is the director of the research group 'Hollywood Memories: Cinematic Remaking and the Construction of Global Movie Generations', funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). She has published widely on cinematic remaking, the nostalgia franchise, and TV series revivals.
Contact: kathleen.loock@engsem.uni-hannover.de

Stefan Dierkes is a PhD student at Leibniz University Hannover. He is part of the DFG-funded Research Group 'Hollywood Memories: Cinematic Remaking and the Construction of Global Movie Generations'. His dissertation analyses Hollywood's remaking culture and its impact on German audiences, combining qualitative methods, historical research, and film analysis.
Contact: stefan.dierkes@engsem.uni-hannover.de

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