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Family Resemblances

The Genericity of the Hollywood Sequel

In a memo dated 7 May 1942, screenwriter Harry Kurnitz gave notes to producer Everett Riskinn on "The Thin Man's Rival", a script which eventually formed the basis for The Thin Man Goes Home (1945).[1] Kurnitz pointed to a scene in which private detective Nick Charles (William Powell) interviews a man suspected of murder and suggested to Riskinn that the freewheeling sleuth would "appear more detective-like if the suspect is tricked into admitting hatred of the victim".[2] Kurnitz connected this observation to a broader set of compositional rules by adding that "[a] reluctant witness is a better suspect than a man seemingly bent on involving himself", a principle he credited jokingly to a fictitious writing manual named "'The Art of the Mystery Story by Professor Wolfgang Kurnitz'".[3] Further into the memo, Kurnitz criticized the script's closing pages for implying that Nick Charles knew the identity of the murderer prior to the climactic interrogation scene. This revelation, he noted, ran counter to the equivalent scenes of past *Thin Man* installments, in which Nick brought "the characters together in the hope of igniting a spark which will illuminate the dark niches of the minds with which he is confronted […]. If Nick knows who killed who, it is not considered cricket".[4]

Kurnitz's observations tell us much about the relationship between the sequel and genre. He approached this installment of the *Thin Man* films not only in relation to the conventions and compositional techniques of a "genre-at-large" (the "mystery story"),[5] but to another, comparatively finely-tuned, set of conventions associated specifically with,

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1) Harry Kurnitz, internal memo to Everett Riskinn headed 'Notes on the draft of the Thin Man's Rival', 7 May 1942, MGM/Turner Script Files, University of Southern California Cinematic Arts Library.
2) Ibid.
3) Ibid.
4) Ibid.
5) By "genre at large", I mean a widely recognised category or type; a cluster of conventions which inform the composition of new works which seek to participate in that genre in order to appeal to an audience. In this case, the "mystery story" is a genre which existed in the 1940s across entertainment media, being commonplace in "pulp" novels, story magazines, and on radio, as well as in film.

and internal to, the *Thin Man* series; conventions which had been established by their repetition across four earlier films. Nick Charles is a detective, and must therefore fulfill certain generic requirements relating to his profession (i.e. solving mysterious crimes), but he also possesses certain character traits which distinguish him from his peers. Unlike the titular detective from such films as Charlie Chan in Paris (1935) and Charlie Chan's Murder Cruise (1940), Nick Charles' thought processes are not inscrutable and, unlike Sherlock Holmes, his methods are not scientific; instead, Charles' knowledge only exceeds that of the audience by the narrowest of margins, and then only in the final moments of the film. For Nick Charles to alter his approach to detective work would threaten to undermine the unspoken contract of obligation and expectation binding the producers of the *Thin Man* series to the films' imagined audience. As this exchange suggests, The Thin Man Goes Home is a sequel in which are negotiated two sets of conventions and expectations. At the macro level, these conventions and expectations relate to the detective or mystery genre, with which the film and its predecessors are generally associated. At a micro level, those conventions and expectations belong to what might be called the "Thin Man genre". Illuminating the manner in which these conventions are established, as well as the manner in which they interact and inform one another, are among the principal concerns of this essay.

In broader terms, this essay aims to shed new light on the poetics of the Hollywood sequel. It intends to do so by considering points of intersection and divergence between, on the one hand, the characteristics of sequel production and the sequel form and, on the other hand, the workings of genre at the level of both production and content.[6] In the academy and in popular criticism, the Hollywood sequel has tended to be described in terms similar to those used to describe films aligned closely to a given genre. Both types of production are deemed to be repetitive and formulaic, to be bound by a distinctive set of conventions and audience expectations, and to be driven by the economic imperatives of an inherently risky business in which security of investment is valued over originality of product.[7]

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6)   One might describe my approach here as being broadly aligned with the tradition of "historical poetics", as propounded primarily by David Bordwell, by Kristin Thompson, and by Henry Jenkins. I have strived to ensure that the work I have undertaken in researching this piece is "problem-and-question-centered" in a manner commensurate with Bordwell's definition of historical poetics in so much as it approaches certain research questions from the bottom up, thus formulating responses to those questions in response to my findings, rather than a top-down attempt to mould those findings to fit a set of pre-existing historical and theoretical assumptions. See David Bordwell, 'Historical poetics of cinema', in Barton Palmer (ed.), *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches* (Atlanta: Georgia State University Press, 1988), pp. 369–398; Henry Jenkins, 'Historical poetics', in Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds), *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 99–122.

7)   See for example Vincent Canby, 'Sequels are a sign of fear', *New York Times*, 25 May 1975, p. 119; Vincent Canby, '"Jaws II" — or "did you ever see a shark dancing?"', *New York Times*, 8 May 1977, p. 57; Stephen M. Silverman, 'Hollywood cloning: sequels, prequels, remakes and spin-offs', *American Film* vol. 3 no. 9 (July-August 1978), pp. 24–30; Janet Maslin, 'Is it a happy ending if a movie breeds no sequel?', *New York Times*, 6 February 1983, p. H15; James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New American Library: New York 1979); Julie Salamon, 'The return of nearly everybody', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 1983, p. 27; Peter Rainer, 'Sequel-mania: is it throttling Hollywood?', *L.A. Herald-Examiner*, 8th July, 1983, p. D7; J. Hoberman, 'Ten years that shook the world', *American Film* vol. 10, no. 8 (June 1985), pp. 34–59; Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without*

It is not uncommon for genre theorists to assume that the generic nature of Hollywood output is the result of the need simultaneously to replicate previous successes while also differentiating product; to offer audiences (or at least to appear to be offering them) something both new and familiar.[8] Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the strategy of product differentiation takes on a different quality if the elements which originally distinguished a film from other films are then extended into a sequel or a film series. What initially differentiated THE THIN MAN from other detective films, is thus repeated in its sequels. While Hollywood sequels might often be described as generic, the similarities between sequels and their respective predecessors cannot be understood strictly on the same terms as those similarities characterizing films of a given genre. The balance of repetition and differentiation from sequel to sequel is, comparatively speaking, narrower and more particularized.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section seeks to understand how film genre theory has tended to conceptualize the formulaic nature of Hollywood's output, particularly in relation to genre cycles. It considers how the sequel might sit in relation to the process of genre development — or genericization — by discussing the various ways in which the form can be understood as generic, and the role of broader genre affiliations therein. Moving on from here, the second section examines in more detail the repetitive nature of the sequel at a formal and narrative level. This section considers the inherent conflict between the need to ensure that a sequel delivers familiar pleasures and the requirement that both the narrative and characters are developed, and also identifies the tendency for sequels to amplify certain recurring elements, delivering more of the same with an emphasis on "more". Finally, the third section looks at the manner in which industrial forces come to bear on the nature of what a sequel carries over from its predecessor(s) and what is discarded. As the description of this last section makes clear, while much of this essay is dedicated to discussion of how the generic dynamic between a first film and its sequel might develop at a formal level, it remains mindful of the fact that this dynamic is principally determined not by a hermetically-sealed internal process, but also by extra-textual factors.

Genre, Cycles, and the Sequel

The awkward fit between existing genre theory and the sequel form is immediately apparent when we note that a greater degree of similarity characterizes the relationship between

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Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (eds) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 8–3. Richard Corliss 'Sequels aren't equals', *Time*, 20 December 1993. Time Archive, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,979869,00.htm> [accessed 1 June 2012].

8)   See for example Henry Jenkins, '"Just men in tights": rewriting silver age comics in an era of multiplicity', in Mark Jancovich and Lincoln Geraghty (eds), *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media* (London: McFarland, 2008), p. 231. See also Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Routledge: London 2000); Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 7.

the first film of a series and its sequel(s) than the relationships between constituent films of a given genre. Films in the same genre might originate from the same gene pool, so to speak, but sequels ostensibly inherit DNA from their predecessors. Nonetheless, some principles governing genre still apply to the antecedent-sequel relationship: sequels usually share at least some characteristics with their predecessors; and, at an industrial level, such films provide a variation on what Barry Langford terms "the generic 'contract' of familiarity leavened by novelty", offering variations on familiar situations featuring recurrent characters.[9] Given these conceptual similarities, genre theory is in part extendable to a poetics of the sequel, with some models of generic change, transformation, and cyclicism transferable to a study of shifts in content between antecedent and sequel(s).

During what might be called the first wave of genre theory revisionism, Thomas Schatz, Brian Taves, and John Cawelti offered evolutionary models, all of which attempted to chart the process of generic change and transformation.[10] Schatz, for example, identified four developmental stages — experimental, classic, refinement and baroque — and proposed that each genre progressed "from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism".[11] However, as Rick Altman has pointed out, evolutionary models such as this "paradoxically stress generic predictability more than variation", suggesting that genres follow a standardized trajectory bearing little resemblance to the "unexpected mutations" which actually characterize the historical development of genres.[12]

Although scholars now largely refute the idea that genres are stable, trans-historical categories, in favor of approaching genres as dynamic, historical processes,[13] there have been surprisingly few attempts to theorize how genre as a process — in terms of both formulaic production practices and the conventions in content such practices generate — might actually function. It is now something of a given among genre scholars that central to this process is the notion of the cycle, whereby a relatively large number of films of a particular type are produced within a particular time period.[14] And yet, despite this consensus, it is a curious tendency of writing on genre that there are very few studies which

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9)   Langford, *Film Genre*, p. 1.

10) As Altman has pointed out, evolutionary models such as Schatz's model "paradoxically stress generic predictability more than variation", suggesting that genres follow a standardized trajectory bearing little resemblance to the "unexpected mutations" which actually characterize the historical development of genres. See John Cawelti, *Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1971); Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981); Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: Genre of Historical Adventure in the Movies* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1993); Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 21–22.

11) Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, p. 38.

12) Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp. 21–22.

13) For an account of this historical turn see Christine Gledhill, 'Rethinking genre', in Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill (eds), *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000), p. 239.

14) Lawrence Alloway, Tino Balio, Barbara Klinger, Richard Maltby, and Steve Neale have all argued the case for paying close attention to cyclicism. See Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: the movies 1946–1964.* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971); Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939 (History of the American Cinema, Volume 5)* (London: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1993), pp. 73–109; Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp. 107–143; Barbara Klinger, '"Local" genres: the Hollywood adult film in the 1950s', in Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (eds), *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* (London: BFI, 1994), pp.134–146; Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, pp. 231–242.

engage actively with understanding the cycle as a process itself. Even those studies which stress the non-linear, stop-start nature of cycles, rather than a smooth evolutionary path, rarely engage directly with the full implications of such an acknowledgment. Barry Keith Grant, for example, concedes that genre history is shaped by cycles, defining them as "intense periods of production of a similar group of genre movies",[15] but does not consider how such periods stem from, and feed into, the prior and subsequent iterations of the genre. In this account, cycles are something that occasionally happens to a genre, rather than being part of the process of genre formation itself.

Altman offers the notion of "The Producer's Game" — an attempt to describe more accurately the industry's role in genre formation. In this account, producers identify box office successes, analyze those successes in order to determine which elements made them successful, and make another film utilizing those elements in conjunction with elements drawn from other hits.[16] The Producer's Game, Altman argues, "puts studio personnel in the place of the critic", insofar as it requires industry-insiders to isolate those elements of a hit which will be replicated in subsequent films.[17] Altman's approach does forge a stronger connection between genre as an industrial process and genre as a cluster of formal, thematic, and aesthetic conventions, not least because it stresses the dynamic nature of the process: producers might not identify a hit's successful elements correctly, for example, meaning that it may take some time before whatever appealed to the audience finds its way into a new film. Furthermore, given that different producers will be looking at the same hit, there is every possibility that certain key elements (be they common themes or character types) will find their way into very different types of film, as is reflected in Tino Balio's survey of Hollywood production trends in the 1930s.[18] Altman's attempt to position producers as critics, however, somewhat flattens crucial distinctions between the activities of these two groups. Producers, after all, are looking to isolate whatever it was from a recent hit which attracted audiences, whereas critics are looking retrospectively at both the first film and what followed so as to isolate similarities in content. Producers are also, unlike critics, not simply looking for what can be (or has been) replicated but, rather, what they are able to replicate with the resources they have available; resources which may differ from those that had been available to the producers of the hit under scrutiny, both in scale (particularly in terms of production budgets) and in type (in terms of the creative talent at their disposal, for example).

Recently, Richard Nowell has made a more concerted and successful effort to describe the cycle as an industrial process. Nowell first distinguishes the cycle from shorter-term trends he terms "fads" (in which similar themes, settings or character types recur across different types of film over a particular period) and "clusters" (a very short-lived surge in production of a particular type) and longer-term "staples", a term which describes the regular production of a type over many years.[19] He then identifies the chronologically dis-

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15) Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), p. 36.
16) Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 38.
17) Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 43.
18) Balio, *Grand Design*, pp. 179–312.
19) Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 44–46.

tinct stages which together constitute a cycle, beginning with what he terms a "Trailblazer Hit", defined as a commercially successful "film that differs from contemporaneous hits".[20] Thereafter, follow two distinct phases: a first wave of imitative films, or "Prospector Cash-ins", from which emerges at least one further success, termed a "Reinforcing Hit"; and a second wave in which a larger quantity of imitators ("Carpetbagger Cash-ins") is produced, after which the cycle winds down, and the number of similar films being produced drops to what Nowell calls "base level".[21] Delineating further, Nowell suggests that the Trailblazer Hit can come in the form of either a "Pioneer Production", which forges pre-existing elements with new material to produce a film deemed to be relatively innovative or unique, or a "Speculator Production", which utilizes a template which "has either never performed well commercially or has not generated a hit for a considerable time".[22] The latter, Nowell argues, are the more prevalent and the more commonly successful of the two, and are thus more likely to initiate a new cycle.

Although Nowell does not discuss the sequel directly, his model does enable us to better ascertain the parallels and intersections between genre as a cycle and sequelization as a process. After all, the sequel is almost invariably perceived as a form of Cash-in, following in the wake of a hit and modeled closely on its predecessor. Of course, that hit may not always be classifiable as a "Trailblazer", but there are many instances in which a Trailblazer Hit inspires both sequels and non-sequel Cash-ins. Taking as an example the youth-targeted movies which are Nowell's principal subject; horror and youth-orientated comedy have tended to rely on sequelization with every new surge in production. Thus, the renewal of the slasher movie prompted in the late 1990s by Scream (1996), the revival of gross-out teen comedy with American Pie (1999) and the more recent, harder-edged "torture porn" cycle inspired primarily by Saw (2004) have each followed much the same pattern as their 1980s predecessors, with both the initiatory success and at least one commercially successful follow-up (I Know What You Did Last Summer [1997] in the first instance, Road Trip [2000] in relation to American Pie, and Hostel [2005] in relation to Saw) spawning one or more sequels.[23] Accounting for a significant proportion of all the sequels produced in the 1980s, horror and youth-orientated comedy have been particularly prone to sequelization because of a combination of intense competition for their audiences and because they can be produced quickly and cheaply (being reliant on neither stars nor complex special effects). In this respect, they echo three aspects of series film production in the 1930s and 1940s. First, while they operated in rather different generic territory, the detective movies, Westerns, and sentimental family comedies, which dominated series film production in those years, were also favored by industry because they required neither A-list stars nor large production budgets and therefore could be turned out efficiently and inexpensively. Second, these genres burgeoned as a result of opportunistic

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20) Ibid., p. 46.
21) Ibid., pp. 45–51.
22) Ibid., pp. 46–47.
23) Of course not every sequel of this type can be traced directly to a cycle in this way, but even if the sequel's conceit or execution seems relatively original — as with The Blair Witch Project (1999) and Final Destination (2000) — it does not mean that the commercial rationale for their existence was any less opportunistic.

imitation, with one success prompting a host of similar movies from other studios (for example Twentieth Century-Fox's *Charlie Chan* series /1929–1942/ inspired Warner Bros.' *Perry Mason* series /1934–1937/ and MGM's *Hardy Family* series /1937–1946/ prompted the production of Paramount's Henry Aldrich /1939/). Lastly, and crucially, such films lent themselves to repetition; with each new mystery or family dilemma enabling a replication of the first film's basic story structure.

Sequels, then, are a regular feature of cyclical production, representing a form of legitimized carpet-bagging. Such carpet-bagging takes place because, as Altman has observed, studios have always preferred to emphasize their films' "*proprietary* characteristics (star, director and other related films from the same studio) over *sharable* determinants like genre [italics in original]".[24] Thus, while we might well understand sequel production as opportunistic, we should acknowledge that it is also a defensive act on the part of sequel producers, one intended to counter the opportunism of competitors. It is also worth noting that the process of sequelization often persists beyond the point at which a cycle has wound down, to the extent that the "base level" of production described by Nowell is often maintained by sequels to the Trailblazer and/or Reinforcing Hits. Despite these points of intersection, it is important to understand that the cyclical process of initiation and imitation Nowell describes cannot capture fully the nuances involved in the process of sequelization. From an industrial perspective, there are subtly different issues at stake when a producer seeks to cash-in on his or her own success. Accordingly, these issues impact upon the form of that cash-in; a distinction I will discuss in more detail in the following sections.

Before addressing these divergences, it is worth noting that many of the issues which have to date plagued genre theory are less contentious when considered in relation to sequels. Where it is difficult to establish how the content of one film may or may not have influenced subsequent films within the same genre, one can be reasonably confident that a significant influence on the makers of a sequel is exerted by the sequel's predecessor. Similarly, by using a title which invokes a direct relationship to an earlier film, sequel producers can anticipate audience expectations in ways that the makers of even the most imitative, non-sequel genre films cannot. Moreover, because of the transparency of the aforementioned "contract" between audience and producer, it is possible for critics and historians to surmise more of what audiences might know about and, expect from, a sequel. Thus, while it is problematic to assume that audiences for Swing Time (1936) were well-schooled in the conventions of Astaire and Rogers musicals, for example, it is safer to conclude that the majority of the audience for Twilight: Breaking Dawn — Part 1 (2011) had already viewed The Twilight Saga: Eclipse (2010), and therefore held concrete expectations about its sequel. Convention and expectation, in other words, are more easily isolatable and identifiable in sequels than they are in a given genre film. As the *Thin Man* example that opened this essay suggests, the makers of sequels or series establish highly particularized sets of conventions and unique miniature ecosystems in which take place the interplay between audience expectation and the balance of differentiation/repli-

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24) Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 117.

cation. Like any ecosystem, these conventions are subject to external and internal influences and, in order better to understand both the nature of these influences and the changes they might affect, it is necessary not only to consider what kinds of conventions are established from one film to the next, but how over time those conventions persist or change. With the shortcomings of early film genre criticism stemming frequently from ahistorical assumptions about the rigidity of genres, it is important to stress that the term "convention" is not being used here to suggest that a circumscribed set of characteristics necessarily govern each and every sequel, series or franchise. Rather, by examining the ways in which certain characteristics of an initiatory success are reiterated or discarded by the makers of its sequels, this study describes the process through which formulae are created, thereby emphasizing loose rubrics rather than inflexible rules — a notion implicit in the concept of process.

Just as film genres are defined by distinct sets of criteria (the topographical specificities of the Western, for example, or tone, which characterizes what we understand as "comedy"), so the formal characteristics that a sequel inherits from its predecessor vary wildly in terms of both their scale and their type. Established genre conventions evidently play a role, at least in the sense that those conventions guide in part the nature of inheritance. Thus the sequels to The Thin Man, all of which operate within the same "genre at large" as the original film, carry over the narrative conventions of the detective genre, while being quite flexible in terms of their topographic and iconographic features. The Thin Man Goes Home (1944), for example, was differentiated from its predecessors by relocating the action from the cityscapes of previous installments to a rural small-town. The conventions of the series dictate that Nick Charles must solve at least one murder per film, but individual contributions to the series demonstrate that there is no governing rule about where this murder and subsequent investigation might take place.

Historically, Hollywood sequels have tended not to stray drastically from the broad generic territory (narrative, iconographic or otherwise) inhabited by their respective predecessors, with clear-cut exceptions to this rule being few and far between.[25] It could be argued that Gremlins 2: The New Batch (1990) is more overtly comical than its predecessor and one could point to the darker tone of The Empire Strikes Back (1980) compared to that of Star Wars (1977); however, these are gradations rather than wholesale shifts. The differences in kind that distinguish Alien (1979) and Aliens (1986) are often remarked upon, with the latter described routinely as belonging more to the action

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25) Halloween III: Season of the Witch (1983) is perhaps an exception to the principle by virtue of its being moved away completely from the slasher film template, wherein young people were menaced by a shadowy killer, in favor of a supernatural terror tale concerning a maniacal mask-maker. The film's makers abandoned the characters of Michael Myers and Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) that had dominated Halloween and Halloween II and so jettisoned narrative continuity to its predecessors. The only meaningful connection between Halloween III: Season of the Witch and its predecessors was the 31 October backdrop, thus rendering Halloween III: Season of the Witch in most respects a sequel in little more than name.

26) See for example David Thomson's suggestion that "Alien is far more atmospheric and less active than Aliens" and *Empire Online*'s assertion that Aliens strength as a sequel lies in it "entirely changing genre, from haunted-house-in-space to balls-to-the-wall action". David Thomson, *The "Alien" Quartet* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 96; Empire Magazine Online, <http://www.empireonline.com/50greatestsequels> (accessed 16 April 2012).

genre than to horror.[26)] While grander in scale of threat and response (as its pluralized title indicates), ALIENS is nevertheless reliant upon the same set of genre conventions as ALIEN in order to provoke many of the same pleasures as its predecessor: horror is again derived from the alien form and its invasion and destruction of the human body; thrills are once more generated by the alien's hunting of a small group of characters in a series of dark, dank locations; and, for a second time, a climactic confrontation takes place between Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and the monster. The unlikelihood that ALIENS might instead have been a romantic comedy or that THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK be made as a musical, indicates the extent to which generic patrimony tends to be a given of the sequel form. But this measure of similarity only partially explains the extent to which a sequel can be understood as generic. For example, before considering narrative continuity and character continuity, the 1975 Western ROOSTER COGBURN has significantly more in common with its predecessor TRUE GRIT (1969) than with other Westerns. This sequel also carries over the tone of its predecessor, being both comic and elegiac in its continued acknowledgment that Rooster is too old to be carrying on as he is: drinking heavily and taking on younger, fitter adversaries. This tonal consistency is in turn the product of the film's narrative, in which Rooster (John Wayne) is again called upon to uphold the rights of an innocent third party against a band of outlaws and, resultantly, forms another emotional bond with his protégé (in this case, a character played by Katherine Hepburn). The basic narrative trajectory and situation shared by these films is common among Westerns, but the sheer measure of likeness — as opposed to, say, a film in which Rooster is called upon to protect or to avenge himself, or in which he moves to another frontier town — cannot be explained solely by recognition of their belonging to the same genre. TRUE GRIT and ROOSTER COGBURN are both Westerns, but to categorize them as such merely hints at their similarities. At the same time, one cannot assume ROOSTER COGBURN's relationship to TRUE GRIT is automatically of greater importance than its relationship to the Western genre. ROOSTER COGBURN is a Western because TRUE GRIT was a Western, but it is a sequel to TRUE GRIT not because of that shared generic affiliation but because it again follows the character of Rooster, depicting events in his life which follow chronologically those shown in its predecessor; and yet, in turn, it is that character and those events which contribute to the film's status as a Western. The circularity of this relationship and the indeterminate play of influence therein both suggest the difficulties inherent in attempting to remove any sequel from the genre of films to which it belongs. Hypothetically, of course, the makers of ROOSTER COGBURN could have abandoned the genre trappings of its predecessor; relocating Rooster to an urban setting and initiating an entirely different series of events. The practical reality, however, is that ROOSTER COGBURN's participation in the Western genre was necessary because its makers sought not only to continue True Grit's story, but also to replicate the manner in which that first film secured and entertained audiences. Here the relevance of the concept of genre comes into full view: alongside the continuities of narrative and character which are integral to the sequel form, the makers of Hollywood sequels also strive (with wildly varying levels of success) to offer a continuity of pleasure.

Character Continuity, Intensified Repetition, and Conventionality

> Oh man, I can't fucking believe this! Another elevator, another basement — how can the same shit happen to the same guy twice?
>
> John McClane (Bruce Willis), Die Hard 2 (1990)

For a sequel to offer a continuity of pleasure to returning audiences is rather less straightforward than it may first appear, especially when set against the concurrent requirement for a sequel to offer continuities of narrative and character. This section considers the challenge these dual requirements pose to the makers of a sequel, and the tendencies towards repetition which result.

One of the most common strategies used to generate continuity between a sequel and its predecessors is a thinly veiled re-enactment of the original narrative, as the Rooster Cogburn example cited in the previous section suggests. The extent to which this device has been employed has tended to be inversely proportional to the number of returning characters. This tactic characterizes studio-era series such as *The Gold Diggers* (1933–1938) and *Broadway Melody* (1929–1940). Avoiding any pretence of narrative continuity, these musical series feature many of the same performers in new roles, and therefore tend to replay many scenarios — and as such they cannot be categorized as sequels proper. Airport (1970) and its three sequels (1974–1979) feature only one recurring character, aviation engineer/specialist/pilot Joe Patroni (George Kennedy), and are therefore able to centralize similar dramatic situations (i.e. airborne disasters) involving similar types of character, rather than recurring protagonists. Crucial here is the fact that Patroni's profession justifies his continuing presence in the series. It would be incredibly poor fortune to be within the space of a decade a passenger or a stewardess on four doomed airliners; but if one is paid to avert such disaster, it is ostensibly all in a day's work. Historically, Hollywood has tended to rely on recurring characters in mission- or case-based employment (including spies, detectives, superheroes, and doctors), thereby ensuring a steady supply of situations capable largely of being contained within discrete narrative episodes, and thus enabling repetition of a basic story arc from film to film. With the exception of the detective genre, such narrative repetition is rarely an end in itself; it is rather a means by which other pleasures (laughter, thrills, and the like) may be generated. Thus, the fact that the first of the *Airport* sequels, Airport 1975 (1974) deals with another airborne crisis involving a mostly new "all-star" cast (as opposed to say the aftermath of the original) underscores the extent to which the staging of the disaster itself, rather than the specific characters involved, is central to the appeal of the series.

The recycling of familiar plots and character-types is central to the emergence, maintenance, and development of genres: without such forms of repetition the very notion of film genre, along with the cultural circulation and discursive functions of such categories, would be largely redundant. For the makers of sequels, however, the act of repetition is complicated by the existence of past diegetic events and the effect those events have had on recurrent characters. As exemplified by the quotation from Die Hard 2 that prefaced this section, it is not unusual to find a sequel in which this issue is addressed via a self-referential acknowledgement that the character and audience share not only the memory of

these past events, but also the knowledge that said events are improbably similar to those in the previous film. Again, John McClane is involved in a case to which he has not been assigned. Again, although he is not yet aware of it, McClane is on a collision course with a group of terrorists, the actions of whom will shortly endanger a group of civilians, including his wife. And, once again, McClane must navigate his way through an elevator shaft and a basement in order to defeat these adversaries. Such acknowledgments underscore firmly the distinction between the genericity of the sequel and the broader textual workings of genre. A film made to capitalize on a recent hit, but with no official connection to that prior success, can be openly imitative; FRIDAY THE 13TH (1980) could be created in the image of HALLOWEEN (1978), with its makers able, without fear of legal recriminations, to reproduce HALLOWEEN's story-structure and character-types, and, in the process, contribute to the formation of what came to be known as the slasher film. The makers of a sequel, on the other hand, cannot operate with such a degree of flexibility. The titular affiliation of sequel and predecessor promises audiences similar pleasures. If, however, the sequel features recurring characters, its makers cannot replicate fully the predecessor in the sense that those characters cannot repeat themselves literally: even if their actions are very similar, they cannot re-experience those same events, moment by moment. That Laurie Strode is once again stalked by Michael Myers in HALLOWEEN II (1981) does not erase the events of the previous film: Laurie's friends are still dead and she and Michael cannot meet for the first time on two separate occasions. He may be as dangerous as ever, but Michael is no longer an unknown threat to Laurie. Ultimately, this phenomenon distinguishes the generic nature of the sequel from other films which might be described as generic. As if to respond to John McClane's rhetorical question, the same shit cannot literally happen to the same guy twice; but the same kind of shit can.

The issue of accounting for prior experience is lessened when the recurrent character is already an expert in his or her chosen field. In AIRPORT, for example, Joe Patroni is already an experienced technician. The same is true for many of the detective characters featured in the 1930s and 1940s series films: Sherlock Holmes (as portrayed by Basil Rathbone) is always already a master detective, meaning that he learns nothing new from any given case that is utilized explicitly in future installments. Often in a sequel, however, a recurring protagonist's memory of prior events and/or the character's acquisition of knowledge and expertise — in other words, their development as characters — must be acknowledged. This issue is arguably one of the central challenges facing the makers of a sequel: how best to develop characters without losing or compromising the generic appeal of the previous installments. Umberto Eco has noted how *Superman* comic books sidestep this issue by downplaying any sense of chronology, and presenting stories which "develop in a kind of oneiric climate [...] where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy".[27] He suggests that these comics avoid chronological or temporal progression because "each general modification would draw the world, and Superman with it, toward final consumption", thus bringing about an end to the com-

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27) Umberto Eco, 'The myth of Superman', in *The Role of the Reader* (London: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 114–124.

mercial returns which can be generated.[28] Although this observation may be applicable to the installment-heavy world of comics, and, to some extent, to the series films of the 1930s and 1940s, there are more pressing issues for most Hollywood sequels than their characters' eventual progression towards death. More problematic is the extent to which the protagonist's experiences in previous films might affect their actions in the sequel(s), the limited probability that such extraordinary experiences might occur more than once in a lifetime, and how this flouting of the laws of probability challenges the verisimilitude of such repetitions.

Acknowledging character development and the passage of time need not always be a barrier to the delivery of familiar pleasures; in fact, such acknowledgments might provide the impetus for pleasure itself. The *Back to the Future* trilogy (1985–1990), for example, uses the passage of time — or rather its protagonist Marty McFly's ability to travel through time — ingeniously to present familiar scenarios in new historical periods. In each of the three films, Marty (Michael J. Fox) is knocked out soon after he has arrived in a new time period and awakens in the dimly-lit bedroom of a female relative, played each time by Lea Thompson: in Back to the Future (1985), he is awakened by his own mother as a teenager in 1955; in Back to the Future Part II (1989), Marty is awakened by her again, this time in an alternative, nightmarish version of 1985; and finally, in Back to the Future Part III (1990), he is awakened in 1885 by his young great grandmother-to-be. Each time, the revelation is delayed for comic effect, and each time Marty is shocked when that revelation comes. Scenes such as these invite audiences to enjoy a familiar joke afresh.

Generally, however, the fact that a character possesses certain knowledge and has experienced certain events, coupled with an industrial drive to provide consumers a measure of entertainment, leads to two tendencies in Hollywood sequels featuring returning protagonists. First, the original main character is relegated to a more peripheral, advisory role — with his or her experience being used to assist new protagonists — as is the case with Ollie Reed (Kent Smith) in Curse of the Cat People (1944), Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp) in A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (1987), and Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) in Tron: Legacy (2010). This strategy is often used in horror sequels because frequently they feature characters who are not engaged professionally in activities that motivate the generation of the film's central pleasures (suspense, fear, and other responses common to horror), and because the returning central character is often the monster/maniac. Second, and more frequently, a character encounters more challenging obstacles than s/he did in previous films. These challenges usually result from, or are complicated by, one of six types of disruption used to drive the narratives of sequels: the arrival of a new character, often a baby; the departure or death of an existing character; the relocation of existing characters to new settings/circumstances; the need to embark upon a brand new case/mission/quest; or the return of an old adversary/problem.

As this discussion of character continuity has begun to demonstrate, the formal logic of narrative continuation which defines the sequel is often at odds with the commercial

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28) Ibid., p. 124.

logic which requires that it delivers a set of pleasures similar to that of its predecessor. Having confronted the manner in which sequel makers have dealt with character development in the service of offering audiences familiar pleasures, it is therefore necessary to consider how and why conventions become established and to consider the extent to which such conventions develop over time.

The proprietary impulse, which encourages sequel production, has a clear affect both upon which elements are repeated and also the manner in which those elements are used. First, and as the case of *The Thin Man* cited above indicates, sequelization generates a paradoxical situation in which those elements that distinguished the first film from other films in a given genre are those elements that tend to be repeated in its sequels. Accordingly, Home Alone sequels (1992–2002) invariably pit a young boy against adult burglars, each *Andy Hardy* film features at least one father-son talk between Andy (Mickey Rooney) and the Judge (Lewis Stone), and Detective Axel Foley (Eddie Murphy) always ignores his superiors' strict instructions not to investigate the central mystery in Beverly Hills Cop (1984) and its two sequels (1987, 1994). In the sequel, what was initially novel often becomes formulaic, as variation becomes repetition. Second, to imbue such repetition with a sense of novelty, sequel makers often amplify or intensify recurring elements. Thus we have an imperious Sister Mary Benedict (Ingrid Bergman) in The Bells of St. Mary's (1946) rather than an ineffectual Father Fitzgibbon (Barry Fitzgerald) from Going My Way (1944), and multiple adversaries for respectively Batman and Superman in Batman Returns (1992) and Superman II (1980). While the characters cited in these sequels influence narrative progression directly, the process of intensification may take more overtly modular forms. In Any Which Way You Can (1980), a greater amount of screen-time is dedicated to mechanic-cum-bare-knuckle fighter Philo's (Clint Eastwood) pet orangutan Clyde, the presence of whom had distinguished its predecessor, Every Which Way but Loose (1978), from other films of the period. The centralization of the character is exemplified by a montage in which, to the fittingly entitled song "The Orangutang [sic] Hall of Fame", Clyde shoots basketball, plays in a hammock, and generally enjoys himself. This sequence is neither motivated by prior events nor related to the ensuing action; it appears primarily to showcase what evidently was deemed to have been one of the key pleasures of viewing its predecessor. Similarly, in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom (1985), Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) pulls his gun in response to a hoard of swordsmen, an intensified repetition of a scene from its predecessor Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), in which Jones draws his gun on a single swordsman.[29]

Although the process of repetition and intensification may seem sufficiently familiar so as to represent a defining quality of the sequel, the nature of precisely what is repeated is by no means a foregone conclusion. As with the formation and developments of a genre, the manner in, and the extent to, which a sequel resembles its predecessor is always subject to extra-textual factors.

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29) That this latter example is a prequel rather than a sequel underlines the extent to which, in terms of repetition and intensification, diegetic chronology is a secondary concern relative to the extra-textual chronology of production and reception.

Formation and Fluctuation: Extra-textual influences

Sequels are influenced by two sets of intersecting extra-textual forces: those commercial factors specific to a given production, which dictate the nature of a sequel's repetitions; and developments in the broader genre with which a sequel or series is associated, which result in a sequel evincing noticeable shifts in presentation, tone or structure from those of its predecessor. Although we may never be able to access the full picture, it is important to recognize that what the makers of a sequel repeat or discard from a previous film, and therefore how the conventions of a series develop, is always determined to some degree by financial and logistical concerns marshalling its production and content.[30]

Box office results have the capacity to exert considerable influence over the content of sequels. Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) was a huge box office success, out-grossing First Blood (1982) by more than three to one.[31] It is unsurprising therefore that Rambo: First Blood Part II effectively served as a blueprint for subsequent sequels: Rambo III (1988) and Rambo (2008). It was the sparkling commercial success of the second film, rather than the solid results of the first film, that the makers of subsequent sequels wished to emulate. Thus, while many sequels are modeled closely on the first film, sometimes a second film does usurp its predecessor to become the principal template for subsequent installments. Consequently, although the makers of Rambo: First Blood Part II retained some similarities to the first film, they largely forwent the mournful tone of First Blood in favor of an overtly patriotic triumphalism and an emphasis on mechanized combat and explosive action. Moreover, where the First Blood pitted army vet and combat expert John Rambo against United States law enforcement and the military, the principal adversaries in the second film were Vietnamese soldiers and the Soviet military. Rambo: First Blood Part II also established a more easily repeatable template; centering on a single mission, which is introduced and resolved within a relatively discrete narrative unit and which concludes with the hero free to repeat these actions in subsequent installments.

Alongside commercial results, it is also necessary to consider the impact certain human resources and filmmaking tools have upon sequels. The professional needs and desires of creative personnel behind a given film can be particularly influential. For example, Charlton Heston's much-reported disinclination to return as a protagonist in a sequel to Planet of the Apes (1968), along with his insistence that he would only take part if his role was kept to a minimum and if his character died in such a way as to preclude his re-

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30) One might identify a teleological bent to this account, insofar as the influence on subsequent installments of the first sequel and/or the first film can only fully be gauged in retrospect. Yet, to identify that influence is not to suggest it persists either without specific acts of maintenance or free of varying levels of modification. For all of their structural similarities, Rambo III and Rambo are quite different in tone from each other, and it is precisely because the sequel must provide some form of novelty that the conventions of any given series, like those of any genre, will always be in a state of flux.

31) Rambo: First Blood Part II grossed more than $150m in North America and $300m worldwide, figures which respectively triple and double the totals of the original and which, even allowing for a considerable increase in production budget, suggest that the sequel was at least as profitable as First Blood. Box Office Mojo, < http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=rambo.htm> [accessed 31 May 2012].

turn in subsequent sequels, is one noteworthy example of creative personnel determining heavily the content of a sequel.[32] Similarly, technological developments also influence the development of conventions across sequels. Special effects are an obvious example; they underpin the changing look of Jedi master Yoda across the *Star Wars* films (1980–2005). Whereas Yoda is a puppet in The Empire Strikes Back (1980) and Return of the Jedi (1983), he appears as both a puppet and as computer-generated imagery (CGI) in Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999), before appearing exclusively in CGI form in both Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002) and Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005).

The industrial imperative of tapping into an existing following or fan-base while looking to attract new audiences is also a key extra-textual force shaping sequels. This drive to expand consumption underwrites the concept of the "reboot", a strategy presaged on capitalizing on the prospect of audiences wishing to witness a revision of, or at least contemporary approach to, familiar material. The practice of rebooting is not new; it dates back at least to the 1930s and 1940s, when casting changes from one series film to the next were commonplace.[33] The James Bond series (1962–) has, also been rebooted regularly, albeit primarily in terms of different actors being cast in the role of Bond. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the Bond series provides one of the most significant examples of the influence of extra-textual forces on structure, tone, and presentation. At the presentational level, the respective makers of Casino Royale (2006) and Quantum of Solace (2008) draw heavily on similar contemporaneous films, in particular the *Bourne* trilogy (2002––2007), which featured kinetic action sequences shot with handheld cameras. The action itself includes the use of "parkour"[34] in Casino Royale and, in Quantum of Solace, a rooftop chase sequence much like that featured in The Bourne Ultimatum (2007). Tonally, too, Casino Royale and Quantum of Solace are darker than most of their predecessors, with a greater focus on violence and its consequences and with Bond conducting himself in less gentlemanly and more brutish fashion — exemplified by Casino Royale's opening flashbacks, in which Bond is shown killing an adversary in cold-blood.

Broader trends in narrative-based media also influence sequel content, a phenomenon once again illustrated by the most recent Bond films, this time in terms of their narrative structure. Previously, Bond films had adhered largely to an established series format, wherein each installment functioned as a discrete episode, with few attempts ever made to acknowledge a chronological relationship between events over the course of the series.

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32) Heston subsequently described his initial response thus: "A sequel would just be further adventures among the monkeys". Writer Paul Dehn and producer Arthur P. Jacobs solved this problem by creating a climax to Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970) in which the planet and its inhabitants were wiped out in a nuclear apocalypse. Charlton Heston, *In the Arena: The Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 397.

33) The character of Charlie Chan, for example, began his big screen life being played by Warren William in The Case of the Howling Dog (1934) and in three subsequent installments, before Ricardo Cortez and then Donald Woods played the ace litigator in The Case of the Black Cat (1936) and The Case of the Stuttering Bishop (1937) respectively.

34) Parkour is an athletic discipline which enables participants to run, jump and move freely across all manner of obstacles.

Recalling Umberto Eco's description of Superman comics, the Bond films generally marked a "withdrawal from the tension of past-present-future",[35] with each episode-specific mission completed by the end of the film. In contrast, Casino Royale concludes in open-ended fashion. With his romantic interest, Vesper Lynd (Eva Green) dead, Bond is shown in the film's final scene approaching a mysterious figure that he holds responsible for Lynd's death. Quantum of Solace begins immediately after these events have taken place. As Kristin Thompson has indicated, there has been a burgeoning movement towards the introduction of a "dangling cause" in the final moments of contemporary blockbusters,[36] a story event which points the way to future narrative possibilities that might be played out in a sequel. In part this situation relates to the source material for much blockbuster cinema since the 1990s, material which boasts built-in sequel potential in that it is part of an existing series (such as the *Bourne*, *Harry Potter*, *Da Vinci Code* and *Twilight* novels) or inasmuch as it derives from a traditionally serialized format such as the comic book, video game or television series. Furthermore, recent scholarship on television and on comic books indicates that ongoing narratives rather than discrete episodes have, since the 1970s, become increasingly prevalent in both media,[37] while the video game industry has employed such strategies almost since its inception.[38] This shift towards film-to-film continuity within the Bond series is also reflective of contemporary Hollywood's industrial drive to create not single films but franchises; ventures which build on a pre-existing audience and which lay the ground not only for future films, but also for adaptations of those films in other media and related consumer product. This industrial mindset is not new, but it is clear that the Hollywood sequels' current compositional conventions are linked to this particular historical juncture in much the same way as the conventions of B movie series were linked to the studio system in the 1930s. The change in storytelling approach seen in Casino Royale and Quantum of Solace is rare among sequels, but the Bond series itself is exceptional: its longevity meaning it is among the most enduring bellwethers of trends which might very well be external to the logic of its fictional world, but which resonate there, nonetheless.

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35) Eco, 'The myth of Superman', p. 120.

36) See Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 97.

37) In relation to television, we might note also that the boom in the reality genre since 2000 has created a situation in which aspects of the traditional game show format have taken on a serialized form more common to soap opera, as demonstrated by, among others, The Apprentice (UK version: 2005–), Big Brother (2000–), and The X-Factor (2004–).

38) On television see Jason Mittell, 'Narrative complexity in contemporary American television', *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006), pp. 29–40; Graeme Turner, 'Genre hybridity and mutations', in Glen Creeber (ed.), *The Television Genre Book* (London: BFI, 2001), p. 6; Glen Creeber, *Serial Television* (London: BFI, 2004), pp. 8–10. On comics see Jenkins, '"Just Men in Tights"', p. 234. On video games see Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) pp. 39–54; Dan Ackerman, 'What videogame sequels get wrong', CNET, 21 January 2010. CNET, <http://news.cnet.com/8301-17938_105-10438325-1.html> [accessed 31 May 2012].

Conclusion: History Repeating

The poetics of the Hollywood sequel presented above has detailed a series of historical tendencies, all showing the extent to which the sequel can be understood as generic; only some of these tendencies can be explained by referring to existing genre theory. The sequel's status as a form exhibiting narrative continuation from an earlier film or from earlier films problematizes straightforward comparisons to the broader workings of genre. Its close textual proximity to its predecessors represents the sequel's greatest commercial asset, but also poses a significant challenge to the creative personnel involved in its production. The need for sequels to balance narrative continuation and on-going character development with a familiar set of pleasures is a distinguishing feature; a feature which at once enables and complicates the balancing act of replication and differentiation from which conceptualizations of genre stem. These connections distinguish the sequel from films within a genre, the makers of which can imitate a previous success without concerning themselves with matters of continuity.

The analysis above has sought to contribute both to current academic interest in the sequel, and also to broader questions of how genre functions as a process; questions that are beginning to be addressed in recent work on film cycles. Barring long-running exceptions such as the Bond films, the number of films within a series, saga, trilogy or franchise tends to be lower than the number of films within a genre. As a result, each film in that series makes a more easily isolatable and identifiable contribution to our understanding of that series' conventions. Furthermore, producers are in a better position to predict an audience's expectations of a sequel than they are to predict the expectations an audience may have of a new film in a particular genre. As a result of these phenomena, the Hollywood sequel affords a glimpse into the formation of generic conventions which is both enlightening and misleading. It is enlightening because it facilitates identification of the process of genrification across a growing family of films, and allows us to speak with some confidence about the patterns of influence, creative personnel, and audience expectations which have informed that process. It is misleading, however, because we must remember that this process is skewed by the sequel's need to evince some level of continuity with a predecessor or predecessors. Rooted, as it is, in the temporality of narrative fiction, the sequel must be like its predecessor, but, with both fictional-world and real-world time marching on, it can never be quite the same.

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*   Where a film series has only been cited by name, such as the Charlie Chan Series, all films belonging to that series have been included in the list.

SUMMARY

Family Resemblances.
The Genericity of the Hollywood Sequel

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Both in the academy and in popular criticism, the Hollywood sequel has tended to be described in terms similar to those which describe films closely aligned with any one genre: they are repetitive and formulaic, bound by a distinctive set of conventions and audience expectations, and driven by the economic imperatives of an inherently risky business which values security of investment over originality. But to what extent does traditional film genre theory help us to understand the workings of the sequel? With this question as a jumping off point, this essay will interrogate the relationship between genre and the sequel, looking at points of intersection and divergence between these two forms of imitative film production.

Divided into three parts, the essay's first section seeks to understand how film genre theory has tended to conceptualize the formulaic nature of Hollywood's output, particularly in relation to genre cycles. It considers how the sequel might sit in relation to the process of genre development - by discussing the various ways in which the form can be understood as generic, and the role of broader genre affiliations therein. Moving on from here, the second section examines in more detail the repetitive nature of the sequel at a formal and narrative level. This section considers the inherent conflict between the need to ensure that a sequel delivers familiar pleasures and the requirement that both the narrative and characters are developed, and also identifies the tendency for sequels to amplify certain recurring elements, delivering more of the same with an emphasis on "more". Finally, the third section looks at the manner in which industrial forces come to bear on the nature of what a sequel carries over from its predecessor(s) and what is discarded. With reference to a broad range of films, including THE THIN MAN GOES HOME (1944), THE BELLS OF ST. MARY'S (1945), ROOSTER COGBURN (1975), RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD PART II (1985) and DIE HARD 2 (1990), this essay intends to both contribute to ongoing debates around genre, whilst also shedding new light on the poetics of the Hollywood sequel.