

Reception Aesthetics and the Remaking of Classic Film and Television Series: A Critical Analysis

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How to cite this paper: Cai, C. C. (2025). Reception Aesthetics and the Remaking of Classic Film and Television Series: A Critical Analysis. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 1(3), 79–85. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9041>

Published: 2025-06-18

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Abstract

The remakes of classic film and television series represent a meticulously planned artistic endeavor that enriches and diversifies China's film and television industry. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, grasping the diverse needs of the audience is paramount to the success of these remakes. To achieve this, it is essential to fully consider the psychological needs of the audience and construct a common discourse space that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. Such an approach not only evokes widespread resonance but also caters to the "horizon of expectations" across different audience groups. By adapting to shifts in the communication landscape and proactively stimulating the audience's anticipation, these classic stories can be rejuvenated with new vitality in the modern era.

Keywords

Reception Aesthetics; Classic Film and Television Series; Remakes; Horizon of Expectations

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of remakes frequently arises in China's film and television market, driven by commercial interests, audience nostalgia for classics, and a desire for novelty. The emotional resonance and sense of identity that audiences feel towards classic works form a solid foundation for remakes. Audiences eagerly anticipate revisiting classics in new versions, seeking new experiences and perspectives. However, the path to successful remaking is not without obstacles. When creators carry out remakes with the goal of market benefits, they need to address the challenges posed by the increasingly diverse and strict aesthetic needs of the audience.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the triumph of a remake hinges on its mastery in fusing contemporary aesthetic elements with the core of the original work, crafting a novel rendition that not only resonates with the audience's expectations but also exudes a unique appeal. This endeavor requires creators to possess not merely profound artistic prowess and acute market acumen, but also an intimate comprehension of the evolving aesthetic psychology within the audience's

horizon of expectations. Through ingenious creativity and meticulous craftsmanship, they must breathe fresh life and vitality into these timeless classics. This is by no means mere replication, but rather a delicate balance of preserving the original essence while perfectly aligning with the audience's desire for artistic innovation.

2. Reception Aesthetics

Since the 19th century, the evolution of Western literary theory has shifted from an author-centered approach to a work-centered one, and ultimately towards a reader-centered perspective. Early Romanticism prioritized the subjective expression of the writer, while subsequent Positivism though still centered on the author, subtly acknowledged the influence of the work itself. Formalism and New Criticism at the dawn of the 20th century proposed the autonomous nature of the work, shifting the focus of research inward toward the intricacies of the text. The evolution of these theories reflected a gradual recognition of the reader's role—manifested both in Positivism's examination of a work's impact and in Formalism's reliance on reader experience to verify the "defamiliarization" effect. This journey underscores the gradual recognition within literary criticism and research of the reader's pivotal role in literary reception and meaning-making, thereby propelling literary theory in a more comprehensive and dynamic direction. In the 1960s, German literary criticism underwent a significant transformation marked by the rise of Reception Aesthetics, a major theoretical advance. Against this backdrop, the Constance School, led by figures such as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, introduced the theory of Reception Aesthetics, emphasizing the central position of the reader in literary reception. Through an in-depth examination of readers' reception, response, and reading processes, they reestablished the connections among literature and society, history, and reality. This theory not only broke down the traditional boundaries between intrinsic and extrinsic approaches to literature but also spearheaded a revolution in literary research methodology, thereby ushering in a new era of reader-centered literary criticism.

The advent of Reception Aesthetics placed the reader at the heart of literary studies, emphasizing that a work's meaning and value emerge dynamically through the reader's reading activities. This paradigm shift opened up new horizons and avenues for literary criticism and creation, fostering a deeper understanding of the interactive nature of the literary experience.

3. Horizon of Expectations

Diverging from traditional aesthetic research, Reception Aesthetics emphasizes readers' reading experience, agency, and creativity, positing that the meaning, value, and historical evolution of literary works are deeply rooted in readers' reading activities. The theory of horizon of expectations is perhaps the most pivotal concept within Jauss' Reception Aesthetics. This term refers to the preexisting psychological

framework that audiences form based on their past experiences, thought patterns, educational levels, and psychological perceptions before encountering a text (Wang Huiqing, 2021, 119). This concept upends the traditional literary research paradigm centered on the author or the work, emphasizing the reader's central role in literary reception and asserting that the meaning and value of a work are dynamically generated through the reader's unique horizon of expectations.

Literary comprehension remains perpetually framed by its contemporary readers' horizon of expectations. As expectations shift, they create interpretive differences across eras, fostering a dialogue between generations of readers and preceding literary works. This dialogue enriches the reader's horizon of expectations. In delving into the reception process of artistic works, readers' active participation is pivotal. This process involves readers utilizing their unique aesthetic experiences to engage in dynamic practices of personalized interpretation and recreation of the work. Given the diversity of readers' life trajectories, cultural backgrounds, and aesthetic preferences, their perceptions and understandings of the same artistic work exhibit a pluralistic trend, uncovering the rich implications embedded within the work. These implications encompass not only the themes, emotions, and styles intended by the author but also associations and reflections evoked in readers by the work's content.

Ultimately, a work serves as a medium that establishes an indirect yet profound dialogue between the author and the reader. It stimulates readers' expectations, sets a frame of reference for the reading process, and prompts a convergence of experiences of the author and the reader within the world of the work. All of these elements collectively constitute the complex and exquisite process of artistic reception. Therefore, in appreciating artistic works, the interplay between the work itself and readers' horizon of expectations must be emphasized.

4. The Remakes of Classic Film and Television Series from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics

As a special form of art, the remakes of film and television series often carry the audience's nostalgia for classics and their expectations for a fresh and distinctive interpretation in the new era. With the changes of the times, the audience's aesthetic experience, historical conditions, and horizon of expectations have undergone profound changes, which directly affect their acceptance of remakes. In the early days, the audience often held a nostalgic and respectful attitude towards the remakes of film and television series, expecting to regain memories and emotional resonances from the past. However, with the advent of the information age, the cultural products available to audiences have become increasingly diverse, and their aesthetic standards have also risen accordingly, making their demands for remakes more stringent. At this point, the audience not only requires remakes to be faithful to the spirit of the original work but also expects innovations in storyline, character de-

velopment, visual effects, and other aspects to meet their growing aesthetic needs. Furthermore, a nuanced understanding of how acceptance differs between the previous audiences of the original work and the new audiences is crucial in assessing the success or challenges of remakes. Having a deep emotional bond and intricate understanding of the original storyline, characters, and style, previous audiences approach remakes with a heightened sense of scrutiny. They anticipate a work that not only respects the spirit of the original but also offers fresh perspectives and improvements. However, this profound attachment often makes them resistant to fully embrace changes, leading to a more critical evaluation. In contrast, the new audiences arrive at the remake with an unencumbered mindset, eager to discover and engage with the story anew. Their lack of preconceived notions about the original allows for a more open and genuine aesthetic experience. Yet, this openness also exposes them to the risk of cultural discount—whereby audiences unfamiliar with the original may miss key narrative elements. Consequently, the new audiences' experience may be diminished if the remake fails to bridge this gap or adequately convey the essence of the original without relying solely on its familiarity. To navigate these complex dynamics, filmmakers must strike a delicate balance. They must honor the legacy of the original while pushing the boundaries of creativity to engage both previous and new audiences. By crafting remakes that resonate with the previous audiences' emotional ties while also introducing fresh elements that captivate new audiences, filmmakers can transcend the challenges of these differing acceptance characteristics and create works that endure across generations.

Jauss argues that a literary work “either satisfies, surpasses, disappoints, or contradicts the horizon of expectations of its first readers, and this method provides a scale for determining changes in its aesthetic value” (Ren Weidong, 2022:115). Audiences most anticipate remakes that respect or even surpass the original. As one of the pinnacles of China's Four Great Classical Novels, *Dream of the Red Mansions* has inspired countless remakes, each resonating deeply with audiences. However, the latest remake has sparked a deluge of negative reviews even before its release, merely upon the announcement of its trailer. From the perspective of Jauss's Reception Aesthetics, this latest remake's failure to gain widespread audience recognition stems primarily from the high horizon of expectations set by the 1987 classic version. Moreover, Jauss believes that in the reading activities, the horizon of expectations, as a kind of pre-understanding and preexisting structure, plays a dominating and restrictive role, deeply influencing and restricting readers' judgment and evaluation of textual information. This influence and restriction are potential and beyond readers' control (Jauss, 1983). Audiences across different eras possess diverse cultural backgrounds and aesthetic preferences. A respectful approach to the original work, with enrichment and refinements in detail, can both reassure existing audiences and captivate new ones. However, the latest remake failed to adequately consider these changes, employing sensationalist and attention-seeking tactics such

as controversial character portrayals and inappropriate political intrigue additions in character depictions and plot twists, which deviated from the spiritual essence of the original work.

Iser believes that, like a text, the potential meaning of an artistic work is realized through the acceptance and participation of the reader/audience (Iser, 1987). When adapting classic works, crafting a remake that truly delights the audience lies in finding a delicate balance between respecting the original and satisfying new aesthetic expectations. This balance necessitates not only a profound understanding of the original work but also keen insights into contemporary social culture and the audience's aesthetic needs. Remakes struggle to find the equilibrium between innovation and fidelity to the original, and excessive adaptations distorting the original spirit can hinder the crossing of the generational divide and fail to resonate with modern audiences. Similarly, how well actors embody their roles is a pivotal factor in determining the success of a remake. When actors fail to accurately convey the emotional changes of the characters, the audience will have difficulty resonating with the characters. This inability to connect will eventually have an adverse effect on how the audience assesses the entire work.

To further illustrate, a recently released adaptation of this classic series featuring teenage performers has garnered considerable acclaim. If the horizon of expectations refers to the potential anticipation that readers form towards a work based on their existing literary experience, then the defamiliarization that deviates from these prior expectations can evoke fresh emotional resonances in the audience. Defamiliarization is one of the core concepts of Russian Formalism, which serves as one of the origins of Reception Aesthetics. Jauss explicitly acknowledged the influence of Formalism on Reception Aesthetics, stating that it introduced aesthetic reception as a theoretical tool for studying literary works (Jauss, 1983). Defamiliarization employs novel language to disrupt viewers' habits, offering a fresh reading experience that jolts them out of their complacency. This concept has not only profoundly influenced theorists but has also become an artistic technique and mode of conception for writers and artists. The teen version pioneered a new approach by having adolescents portray traditional stories, overturning previous audiences' perceptions and bringing a sense of novelty. Iser proposed the concept of the implied reader, which refers to the reader that the author anticipates and desires during the creative process, i.e., the implicit recipient (Iser, 1978). This concept does not denote actual readers but represents a potential consideration of their receptive abilities and horizon of expectations, permeating the entire artistic creation process and guiding and constraining the artist's creative endeavors. Television program producers need to position, source, and produce programs based on the aesthetic demands of the implied audience. This potential consideration and anticipation of the audience can help enhance the program's appeal and dissemination effect. During the production of the teen version, the production team had a clear understanding

of their target audience, which encompassed not only adult viewers but also young audiences and families interested in traditional culture and anticipating adaptations of classic masterpieces. This precise grasp of the implied audience enabled the program to align its material selection, performance style, narrative techniques, and other aspects with the aesthetic needs and cognitive characteristics of this group. By casting young actors to interpret the classic, the program successfully attracted a large number of young viewers curious and respectful of traditional culture, while also satisfying adult viewers' expectations for new interpretations and presentations of classic works. This precise targeting and satisfaction of the implied audience is one of the critical reasons why the teen version has received widespread praise.

Classics endure as classics because they possess outstanding elements of eternal value. People's feelings towards classics accumulate over time and, through the embellishment of memory, develop into emotional attachment akin to nostalgia. People anticipate seeing these classics deeply excavated, which also provides an audience foundation for remakes. The horizon of expectations typically refers to the expectations that an audience forms towards a new work based on their past aesthetic experiences and life backgrounds before encountering it. This horizon of expectations is dynamic, constantly evolving with new aesthetic experiences and changes in the times. In the case of remakes, audiences inevitably compare the new version with the original, anticipating whether the new elements or adaptations can meet or even exceed their expectations. For a remake to succeed, it must preemptively consider and satisfy the audience's horizon of expectations, blending the film or television work with the audience's anticipations to achieve acceptance and understanding. In the aesthetic reception of remakes, the audience's horizon of expectations will be verified, negated, satisfied, or challenged, constituting a process of reconstruction and aesthetic identification. Consequently, remaking a film necessitates profound consideration of audience expectations to deepen the process of aesthetic identification between artistic creation and the audience, thereby enhancing the work's attractiveness and appeal.

According to Jauss and Iser, the aesthetic value of art is not solely determined by the artwork itself (i.e., the "text") but is created by the receiver (audience) during the appreciation process or co-created by the creator and the receiver. In the realm of cinematic art, its aesthetic value is similarly determined by the audience. As a product of the technological era, film and television series ultimately serve the audience and cannot exist independently from them. Fusion of horizons is a vital principle in reception aesthetics, referring to the blending of the author's original horizon embedded in the text with the reader's present horizon in interpreting the text, achieving a fusion of horizons that enables both the interpreter and the interpreted to transcend their original horizons and attain an unprecedented one. This principle is particularly crucial in film remakes. Different audiences have diverse horizon of expectations, and the expectations of the same audience may also change over time.

Hence, remaking a film necessitates bridging the gap between the individual horizon and the historical horizon, connecting the two to ensure that the remake continuously satisfies and elevates the expectations of the contemporary audience.

5. Conclusion

The remake of classic film and television series is essentially a process of cultural recreation. In this process, reception aesthetics theory provides us with a set of effective analytical tools and guiding principles. It emphasizes the subjectivity and creativity of the audience in the reception process of film and television series, encouraging creators to stimulate audience engagement and identification through diversified narrative techniques, visual presentations, and emotional resonance, thereby achieving a dual enhancement of the artistic and social values of the works.

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