

## **Transformation of Cyberpunk Films in Hollywood Remakes: A Comparative Historical Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

The last decade has seen an increase in Hollywood productions of cyberpunk films. These films, designed as remakes or sequels, appeal to both old fans of the cult original films and new audiences. The subject of this research is how the remakes, which aim to guarantee the box office undergo changes and how they fit into the system compared to the originals. In the research, it has been attempted to reveal how these change narratives have been integrated into current policies and the system compared to the originals, and to determine and show in which contexts this transformation of the remakes took place and what this effect serves. For this purpose, the progress of remakes was examined, the originals and remakes of *Total Recall* (original 1990, remake 2012) and *Ghost in the Shell* (original 1995, remake 2017) were discussed with the help of narrative analysis and their ideological and economy-political functions were periodically compared.

**Keywords:** Cyberpunk genre; ghost in the shell, remakes; total recall

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, with the emergence of personal computers and techno culture, a new way of thinking and subculture called *cyberpunk* was introduced. This movement was cutting-edge and impressive, and it looked to a darker possible future with a hopeful undertone. However, as soon as the technology seemed to “catch up” with the envisagements of the near future that it depicted, a new concept followed: “The death of cyberpunk”, also an allusion/reference to *punk*. Yet, after 2010 the genre made a “comeback” with new video games, series, films, remakes, reboots, and sequels of the older cyberpunk-related products.

The subject of this research is based on the rise of the remakes of cyberpunk films in Hollywood after 2010. The hypotheses of this study include that with remakes, an expanding market is created for the audience that the original films acquired and who will watch the films for the first time. The original films that are already aligned with neoliberal ideology are further integrated into the system through transformation points in remakes and the impact of transformations. The earlier films that have the potential for a critical attitude are structured to be more conformist and leave less room for critical readings, the individualist perspective of capitalist ideology is supported and they do not even try to show themselves as alternative narratives anymore in their remakes.

Cyberpunk and cyberpunk-influenced movies and their remakes were researched in order to see how cyberpunk remakes increased in which periods. By comparing the budgets and box office returns of these films and their remakes, for which the box office return is the most important motivation; it has been tried to understand how close this goal is achieved. In addition, the reasons for the rise of movies in the genre of cyberpunk in the selected period are examined; as to whether this is a “comeback”, and how this increase acts as an engine within the film industry, recycle productions are classified to see how they are positioned in terms of box office return, the top 20 highest-grossed Hollywood films since the 1990s have been examined and it has been revealed how many of them are recycle and remake projects.

To expose how this increase acts as an engine in the film industry and how this function

overlaps with neoliberal policies cyclically selected films are discussed with the periods, they are in. The comprehensive history of neoliberalism is not elaborated, but the turning points that might be related to the films discussed and the effects that might cause changes are briefly touched. Then, the early and late versions of the films that serve as examples are discussed comparatively and without discounting their political-economic backgrounds it attempted to reveal how they serve the dominant ideology in the industry with the help of narrative analysis.

The research is concentrated on Hollywood films, as American cinema dominates the films' narrative and stylistic choices all over the world. It might be said that Hollywood's most effective and imperceptible method of realizing this is using the genre narrative and conventions. So the first chapter of the study started with genre studies and genre films. In order to understand where cyberpunk is positioned science fiction genre will be explained and finally cyberpunk subgenre will be introduced and the selected definition will be explained with its main themes. The second part of the study focuses on the topic of remakes. First, it investigated how remakes have a historical place in the film industry. Then, information about the implementation strategies and features of the remakes is given. Since remakes are included in wider re-handling practice, other methods of this practice such as sequels, prequels, spin-offs, or reboots have been introduced and the points where they resemble and differ from remakes are emphasized. Finally, in the last part, the selected movies are compared with the help of narrative analysis. The study focused on the influence of genre and remake conventions on the narrative and the characters of the movies.

## RESULTS

To understand the cyberpunk genres changes through the time and remakes, it was first listed the related movies list (**Fig 1**). For remakes and recycles in general, the box office returns are the main motivation, therefore to demonstrate how far this goal has been achieved, the budget and box office gross of the originals of cyberpunk and cyberpunk-influenced movies and their remakes and also sequels that were concentrated after 2010 were compared (**Table 1**). Here, the new wave of cyberpunk movies (also as visualized in

Fig. 1) appears to have started with the *Terminator 4: Salvation* (Joseph McGinty Nichol, 2009) movie. *Terminator 4* is the pioneer of post-2010 cyberpunk productions, both chronologically and in terms of narrative content.

The study then selected two 1990s cyberpunk films and their Hollywood remake productions made after 2010. Several factors play a part in the selection of these films. First of all, their generic compatibility with the cyberpunk sub-genre was taken into account. Accordingly, considering that they are reflecting the leading themes of cyberpunk such as the ambivalent attitude towards technology, technology and human body relationship, authentic and implanted memory, and the reliability of memory; the 1990 production *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven), and the 2012 same title remake has been selected. A cyberpunk film that is compatible with the mentioned generic conventions and originally made outside Hollywood cinema has also been examined. Consequently, aiming to show how transnational remakes are handled in the Hollywood industry, the Japanese 1995 production *Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii) and its same titled Hollywood made 2017 live-action remake were chosen. Thus, there was an opportunity to investigate the effects of Americanization and cultural imperialism, which are common in the rehandling of non-Hollywood productions.

When it is compared the cyberpunk movies remake and recycles and original productions, it is observed that remakes or sequels are produced with a much higher budget. In addition, it is seen that these films, which generally have high returns, still cannot achieve high success in the budget-income comparison. Although there are other factors in the increase or decrease of box office returns such as inflation and reduction in the number of movie theater audiences; it is observed that all remakes at least meet their budget, except for the latest *Matrix* movie *The Matrix: Resurrections*. Despite falling below its budget, *Matrix 4* was watched by 2.8 million people in the first Wednesday-Sunday period on the HBO channel, where it was broadcast simultaneously with movie theaters (Dellatto, 2022)<sup>1</sup>. It

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<sup>1</sup> It is also reported that Warner Bros. sued HBO for breaching their contract and releasing simultaneously with the theaters which caused damage on the box office success of the movie. Received from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marisadellatto/2022/02/07/warner-bros-reportedly-sued-over-the-matrix-resurrections-release-on-hbo-max/?sh=147487e2698b>

also became the most pirated movie in the first week of its broadcast with a “32.6% share of the top 10 torrents of the week” (MUSO via D’Alessandro, 2021). These data also show one of the sub-factors of the reduction in the number of moviegoers.

Hollywood films are generally known for their closed endings and narratives that leave no room for doubt. However, some films, especially Philip K. Dick adaptations that influenced both *Total Recall* films, use these open-endings or suspense themes often. Some questions are left as in the example of *Blade Runner* in both *Total Recall* films. Just as the question of whether Deckard is a Replicant in *Blade Runner* holds its relevance in its ambiguity to this day, it is open to interpretation whether everything really happened in *Total Recall* or whether it was all just a dream. This not only adds depth to the story being told but also is an economically beneficial move as audiences begin to ponder, speculate on these questions, and increase the popularity of the movie. In the internet age, when cyberpunk movies started to be produced, people discuss these questions among themselves as well as on the internet. These discussions sometimes form fan groups, and remakes may be attempted by producers relying on these fan groups.

The existential ideology in the original cyberpunk films reveals a structure that overlaps with the logic of capitalism. However, this structure expands and adapts in remakes. There is a very individual identity change, which is not something that will provide a more social benefit, but it should not be forgotten that it is also a force that contains very social and destructive possibilities. When we come to the remakes, they show a further individualistic development, free from such a collective potential. The development of the characters works through the narrative of “who can achieve what”, in a way that builds that individualistic understanding and in no way allow the appearance of class structures that they are surrounded by.

Remakes have been reproduced in relation to the global politics and economy we are in. After the economic crisis in 2008, remakes started to rise and the cyberpunk genre was included in this trend. In addition, the advancement of filmmaking techniques such as CGI and the average 20-30 years of delay for remakes, and a "resurrection" of this genre, which is thought to be dead, has been encountered. In the second decade of the millennium, the sky

above us is no longer the color of television like in the 1980s, tuned to a dead channel.<sup>2</sup> It can be every color.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Genre**

From the renaissance to the end of the 19th century, genres have been involved in discussions of the second-class position in the face of art. The new urban population that emerged with the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century caused cultural activities to be transformed by capitalist entrepreneurs. Chicago-based Neo-Aristotelians in the 1940s focused on genres and the impact of artworks on artists in particular. This departed from the previous stance as a movement to reveal the

Genre films connect the audience with the methods such as story, linking events, linear narrative, using characters, identification, verisimilitude, and aiming at catharsis. There are “individualism”, “capitalism”, “patriarchal understanding” and “racism” among the representations and values used by Hollywood cinema, which is criticized for having a function to legitimize dominant institutions and traditional values and instill ideology (Ryan & Kellner, 2010, p. 17). These values helped to serialize and accelerate the industry by giving birth to the genre that they use as a set of formulas and templates in movies.

Hollywood established the giant movie studios and revealed the Star system. Actors fetishized and moved to the fore. Movies began to be ordered with the names of actors, the audience began to pay to watch the stars. Cinema entered the biggest industrialization process in the world. British, Italian, and French cinema, which developed until 1914, collapsed with the start of the war, while German and Russian cinema started to rise. Still, it was Hollywood that benefited the most from this environment and produced great numbers of genre films.

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<sup>2</sup> The first sentence of William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*: The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel.

To sum up, the genres in the earlier periods were used to distinguish what is and is not art. Film genres were first realized in the form of categorization with a need born within the industry. It stemmed from the desire to report how it can give emotions to people. It is then used by film critics and theorists to distinguish them from cinematic examples that are "art" or as ideology criticism. Later, while discussing the work of art, the auteurs who make popular creations increase, again, the discussions of authenticity develop has been discussed. They have issued conventions to measure the originality of the directors. After the 1950s genre criticisms focused on the ideology's effect on the creator and the audience.

### **Science Fiction**

Even though it possible to date the history of science fiction from different and earlier points, from the holistic perspective, science fiction emerged during the period after the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolutions. The process of purifying the dark, mysterious, mystical, magical and enigmatic began with the technological developments experienced in the Enlightenment period and its aftermath. The incomprehensible had to be expelled from this world, and it was during this period that science fiction was born. The struggle between reason and nature, which has come from the Age of Enlightenment, has been the main theme of science fiction literature (Roloff & Seeßlen, 1995, pp. 18–19). In the cinema, it is possible to see its first example in 1902 with Georges Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune / A Trip to the Moon*. In a sense, both film and science fiction are inventions of the 20th century.

Thoroughout its history science fiction got effected from different political economic and artistic waves. This could be categorized in .. groups. The Early SF or Proto-SF refers to the time period until the Industrial evolution. From the 1920's until the end of the second world war hard science giction gained importance. European sience fictiim films in this period –weak Hollywood.

The pre-war science fiction literature emphasized rationality; confidence in technology, and the belief that innovations prepare a better future was high. However, the two world wars that followed one after another gradually changed this approach, and by the 1950s,



cautionary stories began to be written against technology. Technology before viewed with admiration and after with fear in science fiction movies.

In the 1960s the term “New Wave” was borrowed from film critics to science fiction. The New Wave is a fairly cohesive ideological and stylistic faction of authors who presents alternatives.

In the 1970s the genre changed its direction in several ways. The giant monsters of the 1950s, which had become the result of atomic experiments or radioactivity, were replaced by monsters mutating through ecological disruptions or viruses or bacteria. The danger is no longer expected from the skies but from organisms too small to be seen as in the movies *The Andromeda Strain* (Robert Wise, 1971) or *The Crazies* (George E. Romero, 1973). On the other hand, the stories written in science fiction literature in the 1950s and 1960s showed themselves in the cinema this decade after the non-ending space operas and invasion films. Films connected with computers and human relationships with *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973) or *Futureworld* (Richard T. Heffron, 1976).

## **Cyberpunk**

Cyberpunk combines this duality in the meaning of its name, as well as two different understandings in the science fiction tradition. The hard science fiction of “vast technical detail and extrapolative power from the 1930s and John W. Campbell's editorship of *Astounding Science Fiction*” is one of them (Bukatman, 1993, p. 138). According to Bruce Sterling, cyberpunks were perhaps the first generation to grow up not only in the science fiction literary tradition but also in the real science fiction world. So the techniques of hard science fiction “extrapolation, technological literacy, were not just literary tools, but an aid to everyday life”. They were a means of understanding and were invaluable (Sterling, 1988, p. xi). Some actors of this generation were interested in 1960s New Wave science fiction. They were influenced by writers such as Philip K. Dick, Alfred Bester, Thomas Pynchon, William S. Burroughs, and J.G. Ballard. Bukatman described this fusion as paradoxical but inevitable (1993, p. 138). So with cyberpunks, the science politics, determined

extrapolation and cosmic outlook of hard science fiction and streetwise edginess, unrestricted eccentricity and rock aesthetic of the New Wave emerged (1988, p. x).

Every literary movement is influenced not only by the artistic actions such as literary waves of their and/or previous period but also by the social, and political economic system they are in. This system is neoliberalism for cyberpunk. The 1960s were filled with social movements and the system criticism atmosphere. However, by the end of the 1970s, “the future lost its resolution” according to Gibson. This low resolution was due to a break after a deep recession. A switch in the socioeconomic system; is what David Harvey refers to as the neoliberal turn.

According to the ideology the principles of free market and trade, which will make human well-being possible, will only be realized through the development of individual entrepreneurship, freedom, and skills. Therefore, one of the most important emphases is that each individual is responsible and explanatory of their own happiness and action. According to this approach, everyone has equal opportunity and sources, and individual success or failure is explained entirely by personal effort and performance. Neoliberalism's reduction of everything to personal performance leaves out institutional or class contexts altogether (Harvey, 2005, pp. 13,18-20,50). “In line with these policies, while inequalities at local and global levels increase, global elites with capital become extremely rich and the working class loses its right to struggle and becomes impoverished as their production spreads around the world” (Öcal, 2022, p. 213). To legitimize this inequality, neoliberalism uses superstructure institutions such as (but not limited to) media, education, and law to popularize and reproduce its political propaganda and constructs consent. In this study, this method is only exemplified in four cyberpunk movies.

The last influence on cyberpunk is the mutual interaction between the US and Japan. For Japan, the economic westernization and merging with the modernization of Japan after the coup in the 19th century played a role. Films such as *Gojira* (Ishirô Honda, 1954) were taken by the Hollywood industry and Americanized as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (Terry O. Morse and Ishirô Honda, 1956). In Japanese films “monsters” have characters and names, unlike in American tradition. They are not completely alienated. Interest in

these monsters continued with the embracement of robots and cyborgs. While American cyberpunk envisioned a Japan-influenced future, it also changed Japan's perception of itself and made it rediscover an image of itself as the future of the West juxtaposes its unique combination of Japanese culture and Western technology with the West's universality which came as a new development after the rejection of "Japanism" within the culture in the 1960s (Sato, 2004 cited in Stanić, 2021, p. 33).

## **Remake**

"Remake", as a part of recycling the movies movement, is generally based on the script of the previous, or the original film. The main motive power of all these recycles is economical. Remakes are considered profitable because by repeating existing films' pre-sold titles and stories they curtail the risks. Remakes not only avoid dealing with creating a story from scratch but also reduce the promotional and advertising costs of the film. Instead of trying to convey a new story to potential audiences and making it attractive, it is often simply publicized as "a remake of -x- movie".

The rationale for remakes varies from the director's wish to rehandle themes to create "generic evolution" to the idea that the previous production was insufficient/restricted in terms of budget and to the invention of an upgraded or brand-new available technology (Forrest & Koos, 2002, p. 4). As has been mentioned in the first chapter that sound film came in the late 1920s. Later with this new technology, filmmakers saw an opportunity to rehandle silent films. They generally experiment this technology with the material they already obtained. Many of the early sound films called "talkies" were remakes of former silent productions (Rosewarne, 2020, p. 15).

In times of crisis and economic recessions, remakes have been highly attractive to the Hollywood industry. For example, during the Depression that started in 1930, especially independent companies used remakes as a business plan. In addition, Tino Balio reported that the majority of remakes in the 1930s were B movies. Because expensive productions, namely A movies, were easily recognized by many people and their reuse made them feel cheated (Balio, 1993, p. 100). More recently, remakes came in waves whenever a new

technology threatens the audience's attendance to the movies such as television and home video.

This is particularly been analyzed within the “Hollywood commerce versus European art” dichotomy. But for example French academic and critic Ginette Vincendeau in her analysis of American remakes of French films also brought to light the concept of national identity in cinema. She distinguished some cinematic traditions between the two countries. According to her, while French tradition uses *ambiguity* as a principle, American tradition uses clear-cut motivation and character which must be good or evil (Vincendeau, 1993, p. 23).

In this study recycle films are as follows; sequels and prequels, spin-offs, reboots, remake/adaptations, and new installations. As can be seen, these categories are interconnected and cannot be separated from each other by thick lines. This is compatible with the profit-oriented structure of the industry as much as it depends on the narrative of the product. These recycled productions present the same stories with minor changes by minimizing the risk and expecting a lot of surplus on top of that. The ambiguity of exactly which previous works the productions are adapted from is desirable. Thus, new productions can repeat the "top" features of the medium they desire. They often do not purchase copyrights if not required, or engage with as minimum stakeholders as possible. If they are rehandling a literary product for example novels, it is common that the authors get a very small amount of percentage.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Hollywood remakes, the narrative is simplified. Open-ended structures are replaced with more closed ones. Catharsis is created more directly. Also, ambiguities are eliminated while the contrast between characters and actions is increased. The difference between good and bad is strengthened while the bad is designed as one-dimensional. Background stories and reasoning are given to all characters, especially those with controversial actions. The women are made more reachable. The theme of love is highlighted, if it does not exist in the original it is created.

Also, they feature the stars. This impulse lies in the live-action remakes of anime. Of course, there is also the idea that live-action movies will reach a wider audience.

Studies about science fiction and even cyberpunk films were seen as more abundant compared to the studies focused on remakes. Therefore it is recommended to light the path in this direction. Also, in order to reveal how remakes affect cultural functions, it is recommended to other researchers conduct a further reception analysis, which was not included in the scope of this study.

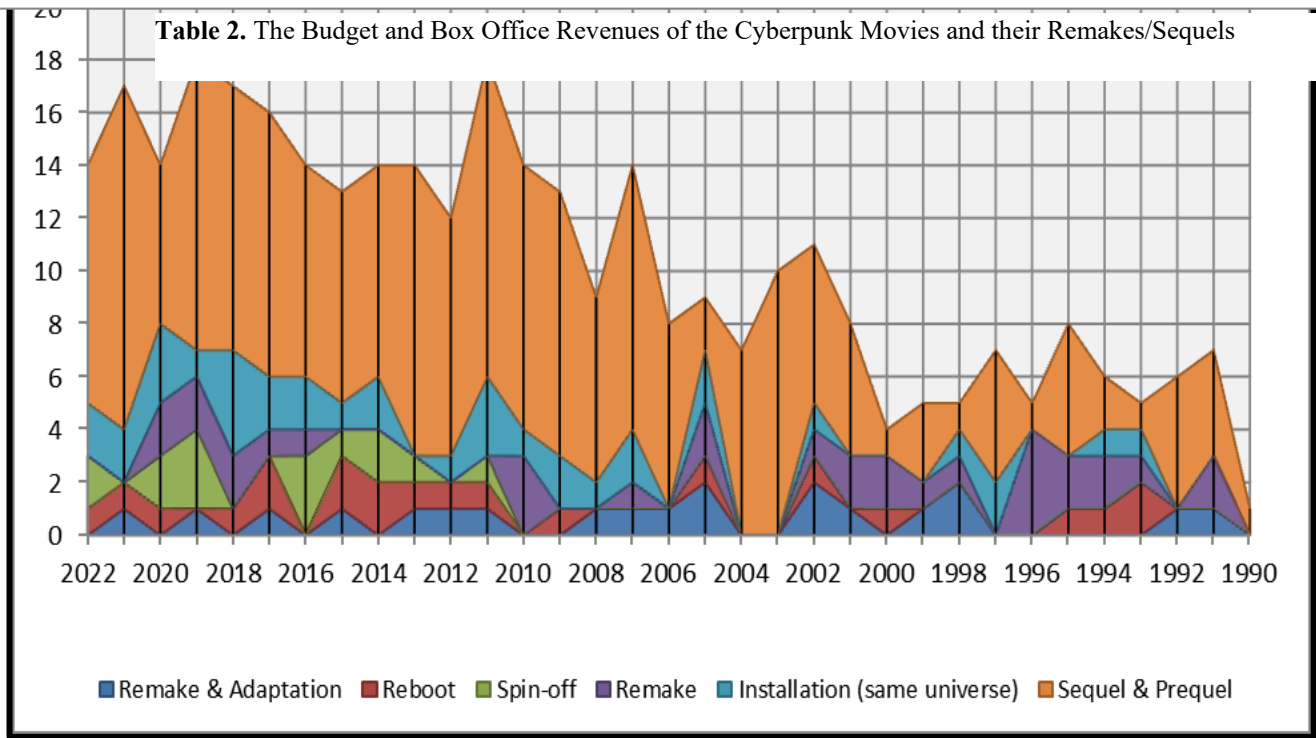
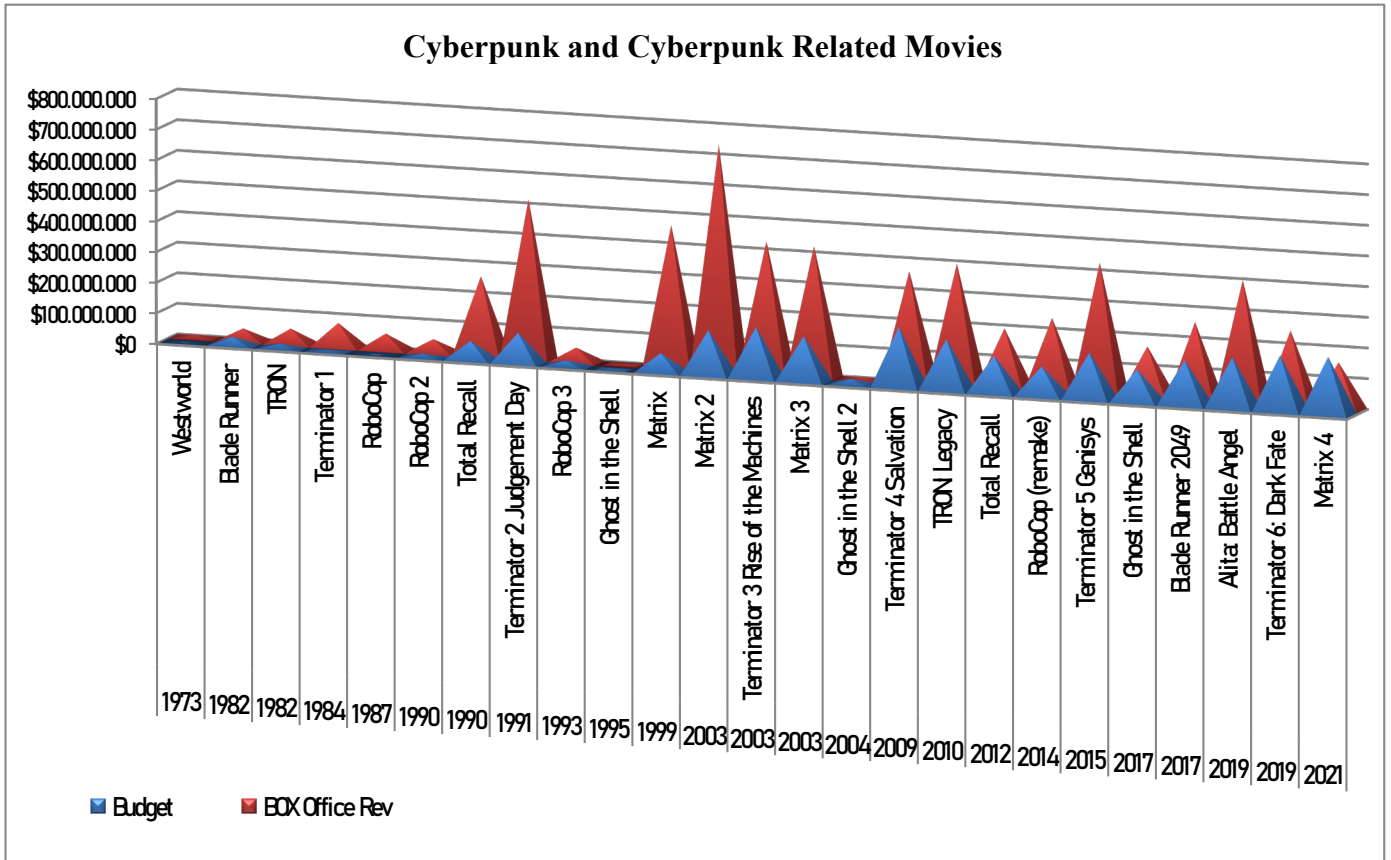
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## Tables and Figures



**Table 1. Number of Recycles in the Top 20 Grossing Hollywood Films 1990-2022**

NOTE: This preprint reports new research that has not been certified by peer review and should not be used as established information without consulting multiple experts in the field.

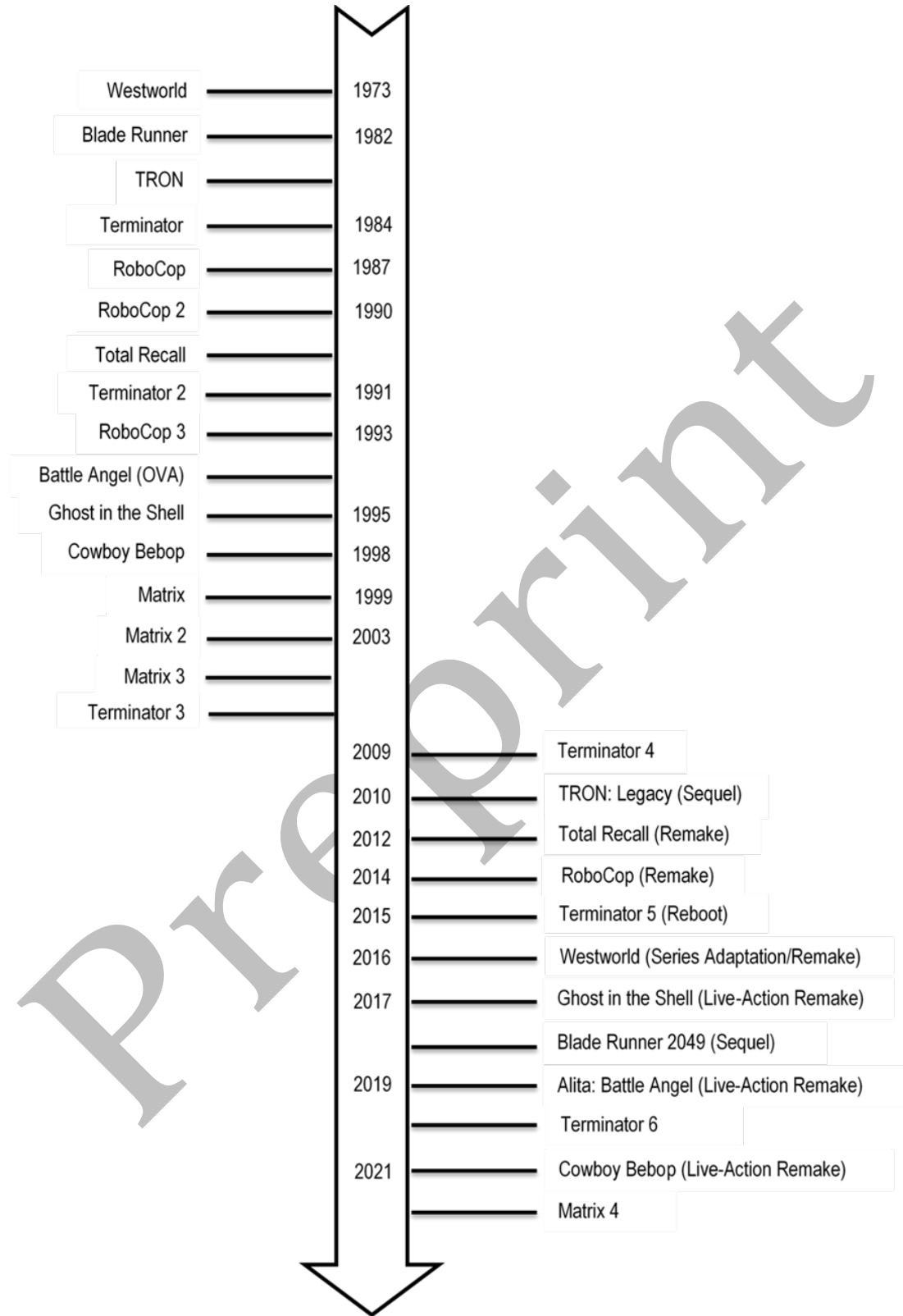


Figure 1: Chronologic list of cyberpunk or cyberpunk influenced movies and their recycles



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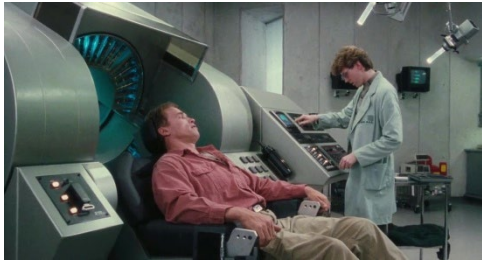


Figure 2. Rekal Inc. operation chair



Figure 3. Rekal operation chair



Figure 4. Kuato helps Doug to remember



Figure 5. Memory subtraction of Quaid



Figure 6: The first image of Major Motoko



Figure 7: The first image of Mira



**Figure 10:** Motoko in a child's body in the final  
"The net is vast and infinite"



**Figure 8:** Final: "I know who I am and what I'm  
here to do."

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