Settle in for a summer of ‘reboots’ at the box office

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Among the many big-budget blockbusters on tap for this summer is “The Amazing Spider-Man,” which in movie jargon is undergoing what is referred to as a “reboot.”

Reboot: A different take on a well-known idea.

That’s not surprising. Superheroes are a summer staple, and we’ve already seen a gaggle of them gathered in “The Avengers” so far. And of all genres, the superhero film is best suited for rebooting and remaking.

So, fair enough. Except ... wait a second.

Didn’t Spider-Man just get a reboot 10 years ago?

Yes, yes he did, in Sam Raimi’s film, which was followed by two sequels. So now he needs another? What’s the shelf life of a character, anyway? And how often do we need these things?

“Need” isn’t the operative word here.

Studios continue to give us what they think we want, and that’s what we get. And while a steady stream of remakes and reboots may grow tiresome and suggest a Hollywood bereft of ideas, one can look no further than Christopher Nolan’s “Batman” films to see that reboots can bear worthwhile fruit.

Or, for that matter, Raimi’s “Spider-Man.” So here we go again.

In addition to “The Amazing Spider-Man,” the summer slate includes “The Dark Knight Rises,” Nolan’s third in his trio of Batman movies; “Snow White and the Huntsman,” the second revisionist take on the Snow White story this year alone; and “The Bourne Legacy,” which takes the series in a new direction. You could argue that “Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter” is a reimagining of U.S. history, in a delightfully loopy way — the 16th and greatest president portrayed as a killer of bloodsuckers. (Or you could just say it’s crazy. Either way, it’s must-see.)

What’s going on here?

“For the studios, it’s about dealing with the devil you know,” said Diane Namm, a writer and director whose credits include “Finding Hope” and “SaSa.” “Most of the remade films were box-office successes the first time around. If it worked once, it’s almost decidedly going to be a surefire success again.

“With a built-in audience based on nostalgia for the story that was, and a new generation anxious to see a familiar story redone with the latest technology, the targeted viewership will widen the viewing age range from kids to adults.”

In other words: money.

Some decry the remake, the reboot, the reimagining.

“They suggest that we can’t really find anything new to create movies out of,” said Robert Gorsch, an English professor at St. Mary’s College of California. “Do we really need a remake of something like ‘War of the Worlds?’ Do we really need Tom Cruise starring in a movie that, I suppose, is vying to supplant one of the great masterpieces of 1950s science-
fiction cinema? We can certainly improve on the original film technology, but why bother?"

Why, indeed? Yet there is precedent.

“You have to remember that Hollywood has always remade films,” said Rob Weiner, the popular culture/fine arts librarian at Texas Tech University, who has written books on film. “For example, there were numerous versions of 'The Maltese Falcon,' 'The Lodger,' 'The Bat Whispers.'

“Remaking and rebooting films is nothing new. Look how many television series and movies have featured Sherlock Holmes, as one example. How about 'Phantom of the Opera?'

“I don’t know that it is better or worse. It’s just a fact that we, as moviegoers, have to live with. Ultimately we vote with our pocketbooks.”

In other words: money.

Reboots are different, at least slightly.

“A reboot is when a franchise has collapsed completely, usually winding up as a parody of itself, the most-recent example being Joel Schumacher’s ‘Batman and Robin,’ which was so over the top and campy that it destroyed the credibility of the original Tim Burton series, which already had a slightly cartoonish flavor,” said Wheeler Winston Dixon, the coordinator of the film studies program at the University of Nebraska. “It was up to Christopher Nolan to reboot the entire Batman franchise with ‘Batman Begins,’ and then of course ‘The Dark Knight,’ which took the character seriously again.”

Reboots, like remakes, have a history.

“The idea of rebooting a film property really began with (James) Bond,” said Bradley Ricca, who teaches comic book and popular culture classes at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland. “As Bonds grew older, and target audiences younger, new actors switched into the role of 007.

“The narrative necessity for the reboot though is much older, beginning with comics and radio serials in the ’20s and ’30s. Serial fiction is old, from Dickens to ‘Tarzan’ and up, but it was really the advent of the daily newspaper that gave people the idea that you could get a story (or part of one) each and every day — and that by making it serial (an ongoing adventure) you could get readers coming back for more.

“Radio operated the same way: ongoing cliffhanger adventures of ‘Tarzan’ and ‘The Shadow’ could go on forever — or as long as sponsors thought the audience ratings were high enough to warrant it.

“But though voices changed on radio, it wasn’t until film that these characters really hit a wall. Heroes, especially superpowered ones, needed to look young and vital, so when actors began to age, new ones were found. The Kirk Alyn Superman was replaced by George Reeves. And though the character was the same, everything around him was slightly different.”

And there are bankable reasons that heroes live on and on.

In other words: money.

Which leads us back to where we began with Spider-Man.

“Though many view the first Sam Raimi ‘Spider-man’ as perhaps a perfect superhero movie — and thus, why should we change it? — the studios look at it a different way,” Ricca said. “To them, there is an entire generation of kids, now 10 years old, who weren’t around to see the first ‘Spider-man’ movie. So they want them to see a new ‘Spider-man’ to get them to learn the story, and thus buy new action figures, comics and T-shirts.

“And they want it to have new effects, in 3D, that look cutting-edge rather than a decade old. The upcoming ‘Man of Steel,’ produced by Christopher Nolan, is also a complete
reboot of the Superman franchise.”

Yet to Ricca, this is not always a bad thing.

“The artistic advantages of rebooting are many, and can result in new intriguing perspectives on characters who are over seven decades old,” he said. “This is why rebooting, like it or not, is necessary. Superman the character will be 75 years old next year. Would we want to see a Superman with a white beard and tri-focals and taking advantage of AARP discounts? Maybe someday, but for now, both Hollywood and its audience is intent on new beginnings, new versions. ...

“Rebooting combines our love of nostalgia with a proven Hollywood track record, making more reboots imminent.”

Meaning what, though? That nothing is sacred?

“Though the ‘Harry Potter’ franchise was immensely successful, and near-perfect in the eyes of many audiences, it perhaps is only a matter of time,” Ricca said, and you practically wait for lightning to strike.

The thing is, while the artistic-integrity part of our brains may indeed think of remakes as lazy and reboots as greedy, it’s hard to deny that the movie-loving part means that curiosity often gets the best of us. A Nolan take on Superman is intriguing as all get-out. So are plenty of other ideas and projects.

“We have ‘Total Recall’ coming out (on Aug. 3), remaking a film from the 1990s,” Weiner said. “The original is so good that I doubt anyone could touch it, even with today’s technology.”

And then:

“I’ll still go see it.”

Get in line, pal. Get in line.

GOOD, BAD OR UNSURE: COMING TO A THEATER NEAR YOU

Game on.

The summer movie season is here, with its gaggle of super heroes, big-name comedies and other blockbuster offerings. Some will delight, some will disappoint. The only sure thing is that there is no sure thing. (Well, maybe “The Dark Knight Rises.”) Here’s a look at what’s coming.

Note: Like always, schedules are subject to change. Please check local listings.

May 11

“Dark Shadows” (PG-13): Tim Burton gives the old gothic soap opera his own spin, with Johnny Depp as Barnabas Collins. Odds are it’ll be great or it’ll be awful, but worth taking a chance on.

May 16

“The Dictator” (not yet rated): Sacha Baron Cohen returns with another unhinged character, this time as a brutal dictator. Laugh riot, huh? With Cohen, sure. The tagline gives a good idea: “The heroic story of a dictator who risks his life to ensure that democracy would never come to the country he so lovingly oppressed.”

May 18

“Battleship” (PG-13): We’ve had movies based on books, TV shows, even theme-park rides. So why not a movie based on a board game? Uh, because it is a board game, maybe? We’ll see. Peter Berg directs, and the cast includes Liam Neeson and Alexander Skarsgard. But if someone doesn’t say, “You sunk my battleship,” it’ll be a shame.

“What to Expect When You’re Expecting” (PG-13): If you’ve ever had a baby, you’ve probably read Heidi Murkoff’s book. And you probably didn’t think it would make for an
ensemble romantic comedy starring Cameron Diaz, among others. That’s why it’s not called “What to Expect When You’re Reading This Book.”

**May 25**

“Men in Black III” (PG-13): Will Smith goes back in time to prevent an assassin from knocking off Tommy Lee Jones, whose previous self evidently looks, talks and acts like Josh Brolin. Did not see that coming. The first film was fun, the second awful. So this is anybody’s guess.

**June 1**

“Piranha 3DD” (R): The title tells you all you need to know. Evidently there is no end to the hunger for movies about scantily clad men and women — women in particular, judging by the title — being devoured by fish. And yet they somehow got Ving Rhames in there. David Hasselhoff, we get. But Ving Rhames?

“Snow White and the Huntsman” (PG-13): Kristen Stewart stars in the second Snow White movie this year (“Mirror Mirror” was the first). This is a more-serious take; when Chris Hemsworth takes Stewart out into the woods to kill her, he instead teaches her how to kick some butt. Cool.

**June 8**

“Madagascar 3: Europe’s Most Wanted” (PG): The gang returns, still trying to get back to the zoo in Central Park. They wind up in Europe where — how did this take so long to happen? — they join the circus. Ben Stiller, Chris Rock and the rest keep coming back. And so do audiences.

“Prometheus” (not yet rated): Noomi Rapace, Michael Fassbender and Charlize Theron, among others, get trapped on an alien planet in Ridley Scott’s prequel to the “Alien” films. Risky proposition, but you must admit, it’s intriguing.

**June 15**

“Rock of Ages” (not yet rated): Julianne Hough and Diego Boneta play a couple in 1987 LA trying to make it big. Somehow this involves Tom Cruise as a hair-metal musician. So we are totally on-board with that. (Seriously. It’ll be good or hilariously bad. Either one works.)

“That’s My Boy” (R): Adam Sandler inflicts, er, releases another comedy. This time he plays Andy Samberg’s dad. After years of estrangement, Sandler shows up for Samberg’s wedding; hilarity ensues. Or, as is so often the case with these things, it doesn’t.

**June 22**

“Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter” (not yet rated): So it turns out that, while he wasn’t trying to keep the nation together during the Civil War, our 16th and greatest president was out hunting vampires. Yes, it’s goofy, but in a brilliant way. We hope. Boy, do we hope. Benjamin Walker plays Lincoln.

“Brave” (not yet rated): Girl power comes to Pixar — this is the studio’s first film with a female protagonist. Kelly Macdonald voices Princess Merida, and while not a lot is known about the plot, it’s clear she is a pretty adept warrior. After the disappointment of “Cars 2” last summer, this is an important film for Pixar, and its many fans.

“Seeking a Friend for the End of the World” (R): Steve Carell and Keira Knightley play neighbors facing the end of the world, literally; an asteroid is bearing down on Earth. Different kind of premise for a romantic comedy, but an intriguing one.

**June 29**

“G.I. Joe: Retaliation” (not yet rated): The sequel promises more action and explosions, with Channing Tatum and Dwayne Johnson on hand. Fine, whatever. But having Ray Stevenson and Walton Goggins does get our attention.

“Magic Mike” (R): Big week for Channing Tatum, who here stars as a male stripper, who
takes a younger stripper (Alex Pettyfer) under his wing. Sounds positively inspirational. Or something.

“People Like Us” (PG-13): Chris Pine plays a salesman who returns home to take care of his recently deceased father’s estate; while there he learns that he has a sister (Elizabeth Banks) he never knew about.

**July 3**

“The Amazing Spider-Man” (not yet rated): Yet another version of the web-slinger’s tale, this one starring Andrew Garfield as Peter Parker and his super-hero alter-ego. That’s a good thing. So is Emma Stone as Gwen Stacy and Rhys Ifans as Dr. Curt Connors — also known as the Lizard. High hopes, but far from a sure thing.

**July 6**

“Savages” (R): Aaron Johnson and Taylor Kitsch grow marijuana, which leads to trouble, namely, them trying to rescue their shared girlfriend (Blake Lively) — geez, they are a close bunch — from the Mexican cartel that kidnapped her. Wow. That’s not weird. Not at all.

**July 13**

“Ice Age: Continental Drift” (not yet rated): Geez, how long is this franchise going to continue? And wasn’t the Ice Age on the way out at the end of the first one? Whatever the case, Ray Romano, Denis Leary and John Leguizamo return, and wind up using an iceberg as a ship after their continent breaks away. Now they’re just messing with us.

“Ted” (R): Mark Wahlberg’s teddy bear comes to life. Really. That’s what it’s about. But Mila Kunis is around, so … Co-written and directed by Seth MacFarlane, of “Family Guy” fame, or infamy, depending on your tastes.

**July 20**

“The Dark Knight Rises” (PG-13): Seriously, what do you need to know? It’s the third film in Christopher Nolan’s trilogy, and we have not been as excited about anything since the introduction of buffalo-wing-flavored potato chips. Can’t wait.

**July 27**

“Neighborhood Watch” (not yet rated): Ben Stiller, Vince Vaughn and Jonah Hill form a block-watch group and wind up fighting aliens. Like, the kind from outer space. If it was the other kind, it would be called “The Sheriff Joe Story.”

“Step Up Revolution” (PG-13): Another “Step Up” movie? This time Kathryn McCormick shows up in Miami, where she — you know, does stuff, all of which leads to a lot of dance scenes. You know the drill.

“Tyler Perry’s The Marriage Counselor” (not yet rated): Perry writes and directs, naturally, this film about a marriage counselor who gets involved with one of her clients. That just can’t be a good thing. Jurnee Smollett and Vanessa Williams star.

**Aug. 3**

“The Bourne Legacy” (not yet rated): So how do you make a Bourne movie without Matt Damon? The tagline explains a lot: “There was never just one.” Oh. Jeremy Renner, Rachel Weisz and Edward Norton in a movie co-written and directed by Tony Gilroy, however, makes things interesting.

“Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days” (PG): Another evidently inexhaustible franchise. Greg (Zachary Gordon) prepares for summer vacation, which will doubtless include being terrorized by his jerk brother Rodrick (Devon Bostick). The second film was actually much better than the first, so maybe this will continue that trend. As a father whose kids will demand to see it at some point, we certainly hope so.

“Total Recall” (not yet rated): Colin Farrell steps into the Arnold Schwarzenegger role as a man in the future who begins to believe he may be a spy in this remake. The first one was
pretty cool, but Farrell’s usually good, so this has potential.

**Aug. 10**

“The Campaign” (not yet rated): Will Ferrell and Zach Galifianakis play North Carolina politicians running for president. The buzz is good. And it’s not as if politicians aren’t choice targets for comedy, as anyone following the presidential primary season can attest.

“Hope Springs” (not yet rated): Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones play a couple who go on a counseling retreat after 30 years of being married. That’s a lot of talent. And Steve Carell plays a therapist. Fine by us. Love that guy.

**Aug. 15**

“The Odd Life of Timothy Green” (PG): Jennifer Garner and Joel Edgerton want a baby. Then one rainy night Timothy Green (Cameron “CJ” Adams) shows up on their doorstep. Sounds quirky. And promises to be.

**Aug. 17**

“The Expendables 2” (not yet rated): Sylvester Stallone and Jason Statham return, along with a bunch of other aging action stars, to once again snap necks and kick in crotches. Know your strengths, as they say.

“ParaNorman” (not yet rated): Animated film in which a boy (Kodi Smit-McPhee) can communicate with the dead; he uses this ability to save his town from a curse. Long way from Halloween, seems like.

“Sparkle” (not yet rated): Three sisters form a girl group yet — surprise, surprise — can’t handle fame and success. The cast includes Jordin Sparks as the title character; this is also Whitney Houston’s last film.

**Aug. 24**

“The Apparition” (not yet rated): A college experiment leads to a couple being haunted. Sounds like a failing grade to us. With Ashley Greene, Sebastian Stan and Tom Felton.

“Hit and Run” (not yet rated): Dax Shepard (who wrote the film and also co-directs) stars as a former getaway driver who helps his girlfriend (Kristen Bell, yay) get to LA, thus jeopardizing his stint in the Witness Protection Program. How many “Drive” comparisons will critics make? We are guessing many.

“Premium Rush” (not yet rated): Joseph Gordon-Levitt plays a bike messenger who picks up an envelope that piques the interest of a cop, who pursues him through Manhattan. Gordon-Levitt is always good, and so is co-star Michael Shannon. They make for an interesting combo — we hope.

**Aug. 31**

“7500” (not yet rated): Leslie Bibb and Ryan Kwanten star in a horror thriller about a plane crossing the Pacific Ocean when it meets up with a supernatural force. And airlines are so cheap today that even if they survive, they’ll probably still have to pay for their drinks.

“Lawless” (not yet rated): Bootleggers abound in John Hillcoat’s film about Depression-era Franklin County, Va. The authorities want a cut. Tom Hardy, Shia LaBeouf and Guy Pearce star. Sounds pretty swell. We used to live there, and can vouch for the area still producing excellent moonshine. Or so we have heard.

“The Possession” (not yet rated): Kid buys an antique box at a yard sale, gets the evil spirit inside at no extra charge. So Jeffrey Dean Morgan and Kyra Sedgwick try to break the curse she has visited upon her.

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