

Resisting Presentism, Reviving the Past: Feminist TV History

“Rebooting the Oldies: Reconciling History and Presentism in Feminist Television Studies”
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In recent years, there have been many reboots and remakes of male-led series that were contemporaneous to the rise of television studies: *Dallas*, *The A-Team* (as feature film), *The Odd Couple*, *Fuller House*, and soon *MacGyver*. By investigating what cultural and industrial forces led to this phenomenon, we can revisit television history and understand its impact on the present.

Contemporary television studies seem to fall into one of two camps: critiques of representations of women and the use of women’s bodies on premium cable “quality” series, and celebrations of less critically recognized series with female protagonists that critics rarely call “quality.” This presentist emphasis creates a gap in lineage that encourages our students – and often ourselves – to neglect history, despite the fact that historically scholars had significant interest in series now being rebooted and reinvigorated for new audiences. I propose that contemporary reboots can serve as a bridge between the present and the history of television and television studies.

Recently Amanda Ann Klein and Kristen Warner published an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* asserting the importance for pop criticism to engage with academic scholarship.¹ While Warner and Klein make references to a few historical media texts (such as Godard’s *Breathless*), much of their dismay at the fracture between the popular and the scholarly is a byproduct of the “third golden age of TV.” For many, we are living at a special time when television is better and more complex, and therefore in need of dissection and analysis to comprehend and fully appreciate – claims many scholars have found alarmingly masculinist.²

Two years ago at Flow, Philip Sewell advocated for the unity of historical research and contemporary enthusiasm for television style. As he suggests, interest in the aesthetics and production of this perceived golden age should invigorate an interest in studying the style and aesthetics of historical television. When investigating the basics of the Classic Network Era, we should “find the innovations and anomalies that existed alongside the exemplars.”³ Sewell’s ideas lead to especially interesting opportunities for feminist studies.

Gender is foregrounded in reboots and remakes in a way that warrants the study of these series through a feminist or queer lens. CBS’ reboot of *The Odd Couple* openly acknowledges that Felix might be mistaken for gay because of his performance of masculinity. By putting this reading into the open, the new *Odd Couple* may inspire a viewer unfamiliar with the 1970s version to investigate how Felix’s queer potential was treated at a time when sexual identities were more restricted on primetime. Netflix’s sequel series *Fuller House* relaunched the 1987-95 ABC series *Full House* as a story about three women raising three boys. This next generation story is more traditional than the broadcast version’s depiction of three men trying serving as fathers and mothers to three girls because of its implication that women are natural childcare providers. Susan Faludi found the original *Full House* to be an example of media backlash against feminism through its effacing of women from the household, a complaint that neglects the more flexibility masculinities of the male characters. Conversely, the relaunched *Fuller*

House foregrounds women but presents its own challenges to feminism through depictions of the harried, overworked mother and the devoted sister who forfeits her career to provide childcare.⁴

Viewed side by side, original series and their contemporary reboots highlight television's engagement with gender role construction and the constructed gendered audience for these series. In particular, these examples remind us that representation is not a progressive march forward. While the television industry "works tirelessly to foster a sense that each offering is something new and that to watch this season's programs is to engage with the latest in American culture," we are often looking back without awareness.⁵ I propose that we encourage ourselves and our students to be more conscientious of this process; studying reboots and remakes may well be a way to achieve that.

¹ Klein, Amanda Ann and Kristen Warner, "Erasing the Pop-Culture Scholar, One Click at a Time," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 6, 2016. <http://chronicle.com/article/Erasing-the-Pop-Culture/237039>

² Among others, see Newman, Michael Z. and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Lotz, Amanda, *Cable Guys* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

³ Sewell, Philip, "Looking Forward by Looking Back: The Role of Historical Inquiry in Current TV Studies" (paper presented at the biennial meeting for Flow, Austin, Texas, September 11-13, 2014).

⁴ Faludi, Susan, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), 142-143.

⁵ Marx, Nick, Ron Becker, and Matt Sienkiewicz, *Saturday Night Live and American TV* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 18-19.