

Remakes and Reboots: The Value of Mining Television's Past

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As I prepare a syllabus for a course on remakes and reboots on contemporary television, I'm struck by the complexity of teaching this topic. The broader themes of the course are not difficult to select (nostalgia, branding, sociocultural changes, etc.). The complexity is in the texts themselves. How do I teach students about reboots and remakes when they may or may not be familiar with the original versions? How will they make meaning of remakes and reboots if they don't know the originals beyond the few episodes I assign? Of course, this is not only a classroom issue, but a larger industrial concern, as well. Is familiarity with the original programs important for remakes and reboots? To what extent? Here, I'm going to focus on television networks/distributors to think about how they may (or may not) rely on familiarity to promote a remake or reboot and how this connects to the value of the original programs.

Not surprisingly, reboots appear to be more likely than remakes to rely on nostalgia and familiarity in their promotions. Reboots generally bring back original cast members or refer to original characters and/or storylines. While familiarity with these characters may not – and, in the interest of gaining new viewers, should not – be essential, viewership for the show can be driven by the desire to check back in with these characters after an absence. Remakes, on the other hand, are in a more complicated position of wanting to benefit from the original brand without copying it too closely. Like much of television, they need to be the same – but different. On top of that, there are fans who may not appreciate changes to remake of a favorite show.

To think about the ways that these different factors impact distribution, I looked at the season one promos for, what I consider to be the most interesting (and somewhat surprisingly successful) remake and reboot on Netflix: *Fuller House* (2016-) and *One Day at a Time* (2017-). The first teaser for [*Fuller House*](#) oozes with nostalgia. Visually, we move from wide shots of San Francisco to the exterior of the "Tanner" house to the interior of the house. These are all shots that would be familiar to viewers of *Full House*. Although we never see the Tanner family, we hear them as they talk about moving back to the house. The last words we hear (other than the lyrics of the non-diegetic music) are Danny Tanner saying "Welcome Home." This trailer is clearly designed to wrap viewers of *Full House* in the comfortable embrace of the original show and create a feeling of longing for the characters and a desire to return to the comfort of the show. Simply watching this trailer might be enough to encourage viewers to watch episodes of *Full House* (or at least think about watching this old favorite with their own kids).

In opposition to this is the first trailer for the remake of [*One Day at a Time*](#), which doesn't reference the original program at all. The trailer mentions the connection with

Norman Lear and then lists several of his hit shows of the '70s (though not *One Day at a Time*). The trailer goes on to offer a set of clips from the first season of the new show, but never refers back to the original. (There is a [trailer](#) in which the cast of the new show recreates the opening credits of the original, but this wasn't released until season two. Netflix does not rely on nostalgia for the original version of the show to attract audiences for *One Day at a Time*. It draws on Norman Lear's brand, but not the brand of the show. Viewers of this promo – and the show in general – may never even realize that this Netflix show is actually a remake of a 1970s hit.

Of course, the reason Netflix may not refer back to the original show is that few people remember it. The program is not available for streaming – even though the remake has been dubbed a relative success – suggesting that not much value is seen in the story of a divorced mom raising kids in the 1970s. Viewers are not expected to return to this show the way that they may return to original versions of *Roseanne*, *Twin Peaks*, *Doctor Who*, or *Full House*, which is still in syndication on cable and available for streaming. *Full House* continues to have an audience, while *One Day at a Time* does not.

Two realizations emerge for me after looking at these promos. First, if the goal is to mobilize nostalgia, reboots are much more effective than remakes. Remakes like *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) and the upcoming *Charmed* (upcoming 2018) may evoke nostalgia in viewers, but distributors often have to work against that nostalgia to make desired changes with the potential to upset fans. And, second, the use of nostalgia to promote certain shows and not others validates the popular television canon, maintaining and perhaps increasing the brand value of already "valuable" shows.