

Just Restart in the Middle: The TV Reboot and the Undoing of Normative Closure

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The recent spate of high-profile revivals of beloved sitcoms has (accidentally?) made exceedingly obvious a fundamental truth of the American sitcom: its highly constructed and strange relationship with time. American network sitcoms are notorious for their repetition, for their slow progression through time, and for their propensity for ending with grand celebrations and a long-awaited sense of closure. However, recent revivals *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne* have exposed the unreality of typical television time by undoing their previous endings. Viewers have largely embraced this erasure of the original series' endings, if the ratings for the revivals are any indication. I want to explore briefly how and why these revivals undo closure, and ask how we can use concepts from queer theory about normative, linear time to think through the queer potential of this erasure.

These reboots bank on nostalgia for previously beloved series as a key selling point—but it is a nostalgia for a particular era of the show. Rare is the twenty-two-episodes-a-year network series from the 1990s whose best season was its last. When viewers express excitement about revisiting their favorite characters, their memories probably fixate on somewhere in the middle of the show's run. This creates an interesting dilemma for the producers of these revivals, who have to find creative ways to recreate the particular chemistry that gave the show its appeal in the first place. Not only have the actors noticeably aged in their years off the air, but the characters “moved on” in the series finale, when the change that was forestalled for years finally came to fruition. Furthermore, the series finales of both *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne* were not beloved by fans because the shows' conclusions dismantled the dynamics and relationships that had been the engine of the series.

The revivals' producers' solution was to pretend most of that never happened. In the case of *Will & Grace*, the ending that was widely decried by queer viewers for its heteronormative insistence that Will and Grace's children would end up together was completely erased in the revival's first scene, which establishes that Will, Grace, and Jack are all single, Will and Grace are childless, and Karen's husband never died. For *Roseanne*, the erasure was trickier, since the show was revealed in the finale to be a dream that Roseanne concocted because she could not deal with the fact that Dan, the series' patriarch, had died of a heart attack. The finale also revealed that Roseanne Conner had changed many details of the Conners' “real” story. So, the revival's first episode includes a quick joke about everybody always thinking Dan is dead before moving on to try to recapture the magic of its previous run.

Several queer theorists have explored the relationship between time and the family, and the normative nature of the timeline that all “normal” people are expected to follow. That

timeline is also expected of American sitcom characters--- but only as the show reaches its end. We expect Will and Grace to settle down and have babies, but not until the show is on its last legs. We hope that the Conners achieve their own version of “happily ever after,” even if their precarious financial situation makes that implausible. American sitcoms have trained their viewers to expect weddings, funerals, births, and/or a “happily ever after” flash-forward in the show’s final episodes. However, when a television text has previously queered the typical sitcom, even in small, non-radical ways, that formula can break down.

The desire to restart in the middle strikes me as a somewhat queer maneuver, one that rejects rigid, linear time as well as the mandates of “closure” on American commercial television. The revivals of *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne* demonstrate the inherent falseness of the “closure” that those shows gave their viewers in their first runs by literally undoing it at the first possible opportunity. *Will & Grace*’s ending was ultimately untenable in the context of a revival, precisely *because* it irrevocably altered the dynamics that made the show enjoyable in the first place. The revival ends up offering a *Sliding Doors* alternative to the original ending—it imagines a future where Will and Grace are *not* required to have kids or get married. It challenges, or at least delays, the imperatives of family time. *Will & Grace* and *Roseanne* reveal just how perfunctory (and, frankly, predictably boring) the plotlines on aging sitcoms can be—precisely because they rely so heavily on heteronormative ideas about closure and “family time.” The preponderance of late season weddings and pregnancies speaks to an inability or unwillingness to imagine a different future, one which does not follow “family time.” These revivals, however, offer up new possibilities and altered timelines, and I look forward to discussing them further in the roundtable.