

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

*Laura Schumacher, University of Wisconsin - Madison*

One need only look at the staggering ratings for the rebooted *Roseanne*, ratings assumed near-impossible for a sitcom during Peak-TV, as well as the maelstrom that followed the series' announcement, cancellation, and several episodes in-between to see that these reboots and remakes often elicit strong feelings in their audience. I would like to explore why the recent influx of these old-made-new shows elicit such strong reactions and often spur conversation in the cultural zeitgeist. This necessitates looking beyond the purely economic explanation for their recent popularity, i.e. that name-brand recognition sets these series apart in a glut of television programming and come with a built-in audience. It also requires adding to the idea that these series' appeal lies in nostalgia – while certainly a factor, the audience reactions I am most interested in are those that suggest a relationship to the favored texts that have been ongoing.

I argue that it is strong affective and identificatory ties between viewers and characters that have audiences returning to recent reboots with a mix of curiosity, affection, and wariness. Television's typical practice of releasing episodes periodically over several years creates a bond between viewer and character in which the character's life feels as though it is unfolding in real time, and thus "checking in" with them years later is depicted inter- and extra-textually as a natural and realistic progression of said life. Fan engagement platforms such as the *AV Club's* retrospective reviews or new podcasts discussing past series help to maintain this bond. This practice of returning to the life of a once-beloved character is a major draw for fans, but can have adverse effects should the reboot not be received as a believable or satisfying extension of the character(s) because the show has now broken points of audience identification.

Take, for instance, the recent reboot of *Gilmore Girls. A Year in the Life* immediately calls on the affection of the viewers for our titular girls in its opening sequence. Laced with meta references and quintessential iconography from the show, it essentially functions as a "welcome back" to the fans. However, any warm feelings this intro may have elicited quickly dissolved for many viewers as the series progressed. It turns out the once precocious, type-A Rory became adrift in adulthood, carrying on an affair with her engaged ex-boyfriend and seemingly having no grasp on her chosen profession of journalism. The character many shy, studious teenage girls once identified with in her formative years on the WB (myself included) is a disappointment to check back in with. The strong affection fans felt (and perhaps still feel) for Rory thus became laced with negative feelings when that affection was not rewarded and the ways in which

they identified with her were broken. This is compounded by the mythos that surrounded the original series run. After creator Amy Sherman-Palladino's contract negotiations with the network broke down for the seventh and final season, she was out as showrunner for the last season. While reactions to the seventh season are mixed among fans, it was the consensus that the series was never finished "correctly" because Sherman-Palladino infamously declared she always knew what the last four words of the series would be but did not get to execute them. Thus, the reboot was not only framed as a check-in on these character's lives, but a long-awaited catharsis to years of musing about what could have been. Given the high expectations and significant letdown felt by many fans, especially in regards to the character of Rory, the revival was primed to receive outsized fan reactions.

While *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* is only one example, it can be taken as a case study for what can be illuminated by fan reactions to a reboot or remake. They can illustrate industrial practices of gauging audience reception to help mold years-long character arcs. When are audiences' reactions taken into account by showrunners when crafting these stories over time, and when are they ignored? What are the repercussions of ignoring or listening too closely to fans when you have years, even decades, of feedback to consider? These story arcs and fans' reactions to them can also illuminate cultural understandings of what constitutes successful, or at the very least realistic, personal growth and aging. What are the specific aspects of Rory's storylines, or other characters in similar situations, that cause negative reactions? How do fans judge if a character has changed in a satisfactory way in the intervening years between original series and revival and what do those judgments say about our cultural values? I am interested in exploring these lines of thought with my fellow panelists and, hopefully, fellow *Gilmore Girls* fans.