

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

Nick Marx, Colorado State University

Although the television industry and trade press have been fixated on reboots and remakes, much of this attention characterizes the phenomena as something recent and particularly salient for big-tent broadcasters. The truth, of course, is that remaking/rebooting has long been a part of the collective televisual heritage. What lessons can we draw from the (recent) history of remaking and rebooting, especially as they're practiced on smaller-scale and niche levels?

The case of MTV, Viacom, and generational turnover presents an interesting case in this regard. While boomer nostalgia thrived in the 1990s, the cultural products of that decade have, fittingly enough, also seen their own recent resurgence. Over the course of the late 2000s and early 2010s, various pockets of the American commercial media industries resurrected and repackaged television programs, music, and movies of the 1990s for re-consumption by a post-baby boomer populace presumed to be nostalgic for its childhood. TeenNick, a part of Nickelodeon's stable of cable channels, re-aired episodes of 90s comedies such as *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991-1994), *Doug* (1991-1994), and *Kenan & Kel* (1996-2000). The programming block was called "The '90s Are All That," after the long-running sketch comedy originally shown on Nickelodeon from 1994-2005, *All That*. Bands like My Bloody Valentine, Pavement, and Hole all reunited in the late 2000s in an effort to re-capture their 1990s appeal. The 2012 Sundance Film Festival even offered *Reality Bites* (1994) as part of its "From the Collection" series, either oblivious to the film's mordant critique of corporate media's co-option of "indie" sensibilities, or eager to indulge in that very practice. The nostalgic ploys were, on one level, a way for these outlets to extract additional revenue from recycling their archived content. But on another level, the 90s nostalgia cycle played into what George Lipsitz describes as evoking "the experiences of the past to lend legitimacy to the dominant ideology of the present."¹ Rather than reinforce narratives of national unity and social cohesion, however, this dominant ideology sought to balkanize media consumers. The commodification of 90s nostalgia served as a way to assure millennial and Generation X audiences—as they age their way through television's prized 18-49-year-old demographic—that they, too, have their own cultural heritage distinct from, and just as important as, that of baby boomers.

Perhaps the most notorious purveyor of 1990s nostalgia, remakes, and reboots has been, fittingly, MTV, the cable network that became its own self-perpetuating zeitgeist across the decade by appropriating Generation X's "barely formed narratives" and selling them back at young viewers.² Its stock of music videos and original

¹ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 42.

² Wilson, "My So-Called Adulthood."

programming from the era provided an ample source of material to feed the nostalgia wave and exploit its own televisual legacy. In the late 2000s, MTV and its subchannels re-launched 90s staples like *Headbangers Ball* (1987-1995, MTV2 2003-2012), borrowed *Ren & Stimpy* (1991-1995) reruns from Nickelodeon (also owned by Viacom), and ordered new episodes of *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-1997, 2011). The rebooted *Beavis and Butt-Head*, in which the eponymous characters crack more jokes about MTV's pandering reality fare than they do about Ween and Blind Melon videos, suggests that the network is trying to have it both ways, inviting millennials—now the network's preferred youth audience—to laugh at *Teen Mom* (2009-2012, 2015-) and *The Hills* (2006-2010) through an ironic decoding that is decidedly not of their time. Indeed, MTV's 2010 rebranding as simply "MTV" (and no longer "Music Television") accompanied a bizarre proclamation from MTV Networks vice president Van Toffler that it was "...pushing Generation X out. We're slaves to our different audiences, for MTV that's millennials, who are vastly different than Generation X; they're definitely less cynical—they're more civic minded."³ MTV told the viewers that first defined the aesthetic and comedic sensibilities of its original programming not only that they were no longer welcome there, but also that those sensibilities shifted to fit a more attractive commodity audience.

³ Hibberd, "MTV Pushing Out 'Cynical' Generation X."