

# American TV Series Revivals: Introduction

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/tvn)**Kathleen Lookk<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

This special issue examines contemporary American TV series revivals with a focus on production and reception contexts as well as the industrial, cultural, and textual practices involved. Each essay is concerned with a different case study and brings a distinct approach to the analysis of the trend on American network television and the online streaming service Netflix. Together, they analyze how revivals rely on past TV experiences to circulate new products through the crowded contemporary media landscape, and how they seek to negotiate the televisual heritage of original series, feelings of generational belonging, as well as notions of the past, present, and future in meaningful ways. This introduction to the special issue provides the definitions, broader historical context, and theoretical framework of televisual repetition and innovation for understanding contemporary TV series revivals.

**Keywords**

TV series revival, rerun, reunion show, spin-off, reboot, afterlife of television series

“[T]he ending is over,” Zoe Williams writes in an article published in *The Guardian* on April 24, 2017. “From *Twin Peaks* to *Breaking Bad*,” she observes, “television shows are no longer finished, living on in spin-offs or reboots.” It is impossible to overlook that, at a time of exploding programming options (often referred to as “peak TV”), TV series revivals in particular are on the rise. Among the series that have returned after years off the small screen are the cult classics *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991) and *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002), more recent shows like *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003–2006) and *Gilmore Girls* (The WB/The CW, 2000–2007), as well as older family sitcoms like *Full House* (ABC, 1987–1995).<sup>1</sup> This special issue of *Television & New Media* is devoted to exploring how such revivals rely on the televisual past to

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circulate new products through the crowded contemporary media landscape and how they seek to negotiate the televisual heritage of original series and feelings of generational belonging, as well as notions of the past, present, and future in meaningful ways. The following articles examine new practices in TV series revivals with attention to their production and reception contexts and the highly self-reflexive serial operations at work. Before further engaging with the case studies, however, I want to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the current revival trend and situate it within a broader historical context of televisual repetition and innovation. To do so, I will first discuss how serial modes of storytelling and the “peak TV” environment favor what Williams (2017) describes as “the death of the ending.” In a next step, I will outline the televisual afterlives of series with a special focus on their complex negotiations of temporality. As I will demonstrate, canceled shows have a history of transcending their own textual death in a variety of different ways—as reboots, spin-offs, reruns, reunion shows, and revivals. Having established the background for examining TV series revivals, I will briefly discuss the current trend with regard to the shows that are at the heart of this special issue: *Twin Peaks: The Return* (Showtime, 2017), *The X-Files* (Fox, 2016–), *Arrested Development* (Netflix, 2013–), *Fuller House* (Netflix, 2016–), and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Netflix, 2016).

## Textual Death: On Endings and “Peak TV”

In her *Guardian* piece, Williams (2017) remains noncommittal about the decline of televisual closure and its possible social and political implications, stating that

[o]pinion seems to coagulate around the death of the ending as a good thing: respectful to the fans, reflective of life’s complexities, questing towards the representation of the world as it messily is, rather than as it neatly could be.

If television series no longer seem to end conclusively, as Williams suggests, “they still have *endings* that are enormously meaningful to both fans and creators” (Harrington 2013, 591). Frequently, these endings disappoint because they are too premature, too ambiguous, too sad, or otherwise unsatisfying, and because they fail to fulfill the promise of achieving textual wholeness. As Sean O’Sullivan (2014) has pointed out, however, such notions of completeness are incompatible with serial modes of storytelling that are structured around the fragment, the partial, and the incomplete, and that embrace the constant delay of closure. From this vantage point, the end of a television series rather qualifies as “the destruction or abandonment of a community—a community of characters and a community of . . . viewers” that can never be gratifying (O’Sullivan 2014). Endings are instances in which ideas of work-bound narratives (i.e., self-contained texts associated with a distinct singularity) and serial narratives (whether they repeat episodic structures or rely on progressing story arcs) collide. As commodities supported by a capitalist system of cultural production that favors innovative reproduction and the potentially endless renewal, expansion, and continuation of serial texts, television series are not designed to come to an end

(cf. Kelleter 2017; Mittell 2015), which is why it is not surprising that “the industrial structure of commercial television lends itself to the constant recovery of used, terminated, canceled, expired material for maximum return” (Levine and Parks 2007, 5).

Elana Levine and Lisa Parks (2007, 4) have, in fact, argued that “television series . . . are meant to return from the dead.” If TV scholarship frequently imagines endings in terms of death (Harrington 2013), recent inquiries into what Rebecca Williams (2015) has termed “post-object fandom” as well as studies concerned with the ongoing cultural impact and legacy of canceled television series have effectively lifted the sense of finality from the metaphor. Series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997–2003), *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004), and *Twin Peaks*, for instance, have been described as “undead” or “dormant” texts because they have not simply disappeared after their cancellation but remained meaningful and continue to produce new meanings. These shows persist as commercial goods in the form of syndicated reruns, DVD sets, and merchandise; as fan objects that encourage enduring attachments, social media analyses, and creative responses; and as cultural phenomena discussed in the popular press and various academic contexts (cf. Levine and Parks 2007; Williams 2015, 7–8). If television series that have ceased production continue to matter in these ways, they can be said to transcend their endings—or narrative mortality.

But television shows also circumvent textual death in the manner that Zoe Williams (2017) describes, when reboots, spin-offs, and revivals strive to secure the ongoing existence of serial texts in changing media and cultural environments. In our current moment of “peak TV,” the return of presumably dead media texts can be understood as a direct response to the oversupply of television shows and the fierce competition between traditional television networks and new, digital players like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. At the 2015 Television Critics Association press tour, FX Networks Chief Executive Officer John Landgraf introduced the term “peak TV” to describe the new abundance of series, warning that “[t]here is simply too much television” and that viewers are “overwhelmed by the sheer volume of TV shows” (quoted in Littleton 2015). The following year, Landgraf returned with statistics that served as evidence for the steady rise in scripted original series. According to these data, there is a general growth trend for series production in broadcast, cable, and online services; yet only online services—Netflix foremost among them—have multiplied their original series output more than six-fold between 2011 and 2015. Landgraf stated that he was not only worried “about the potential for Netflix to exert ‘monopoly’ power over the creative community,” but also about the fact that the increasing number of shows “is making it too difficult for audiences to differentiate great TV, good TV and bad TV” (Holloway and Littleton 2016).

Within today’s crowded “peak TV” environment, reboots, spin-offs, “re-imaginings” based on cult movies like *Fargo* (Ethan and Joel Cohen 1996) or on iconic film characters such as Norman Bates and Hannibal Lecter, and—not least—TV series revivals have the ability “to cut through the clutter, to stand out in a sea of shows angling for eyeballs” (Adalian 2015). Such television shows, which are derived from other media texts or reactivate a series long after the end of its first run, primarily rely on audience pre-awareness through familiarity with brand names. They tend to court

built-in fan bases and are usually structured around persistent sentimental attachments to fictional characters and the “storyworlds” they inhabit. In recent years, recognizable titles have been highly anticipated by viewers who seem to be on constant alert for the return of their favorite shows. As *Vulture*’s Josef Adalian (2015) has observed, “even a rumor that a network is considering a reboot or remake of a beloved title can set off a social media (and traditional media) tsunami.” According to an industry insider, this “instant interest” is a key factor in the reliance on presold properties: “People are buffeted with so much content flying at them . . . anything you can do to get them to say, ‘I’ll check that out’—that’s huge these days” (quoted in Adalian 2015). TV series revivals form part of this larger industry trend in which a show’s ending is no longer equivalent to textual death but automatically anticipates some sort of televisual afterlife that trades in the brand value and cultural currency of the canceled series.

Meanwhile, the term “revival” is very much in keeping with the death metaphor scholars use to describe the endings and afterlives of television series,<sup>2</sup> discursively blending a future-oriented idea of renewal (renewed interest, relevance, meaning) with the death (or near-death) experience of a narrative that is located in the past. Revivals, therefore, invite discussions of overarching questions of temporality—as textual and extra-textual feature of the reactivated series and within larger media-historical and media-ecological contexts. The following section engages in such reflections by situating TV series revivals among reboots, spin-offs, reruns, and reunion shows.

## Televisual Afterlives: Derive, Repeat, Renew

The televisual afterlives of series tend to take three different forms: *derivative* (reboot, spin-off), *repetitive* (rerun), and *renewed* (reunion show, revival). Interest in rebooting a canceled television series for a new generation of viewers tends to be sparked by TV-to-film adaptations. Such updated versions usually involve a different cast of actors playing familiar characters and state-of-the-art visuals, set designs, and special effects.<sup>3</sup> *The New Addams Family* (Fox Family, 1998–1999), for example, aired after Gomez, Morticia, Uncle Fester, Lurch, Grandmama, Wednesday, Pugsley, and Thing from Charles Addams’s *New Yorker* cartoons and the 1960s sitcom adaptation had already made their cinematic comeback in *The Addams Family* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) and the sequel *Addams Family Values* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1993). *Charlie’s Angels* similarly moved from the small screen (ABC 1976–1981) to the big screen (McG, 2000 and 2003) and back to the small screen (ABC, 2011). Spin-offs constitute another kind of televisual afterlife, when new series are derived from existing shows after the end of their first run. Thus, *Frasier* (NBC, 1993–2004), *Joey* (NBC, 2004–2006), *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015–), or, most recently, *The Good Fight* (CBS, 2017–) continue the story of one character from an earlier show, as they follow him or her to a new location or a new job, or explore the character’s past. Psychiatrist Frasier Crane (Kelsey Grammer) from *Cheers* (NBC, 1982–1993), for example, leaves Boston and starts over in his hometown Seattle; *Friends*’ (NBC, 1994–2004) Joey Tribbiani (Matt LeBlanc) moves from New York to Los Angeles to pursue his acting career; lawyer Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk) is in the process of becoming *Breaking Bad*’s

(AMC, 2008–2013) “Saul Goodman”; and lawyer Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski) from *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–2016) is forced by financial circumstances to leave her Chicago law firm and start work at a different law practice. Spin-offs extend already established storyworlds while remaining within the familiar narrative frameworks of the preceding shows, simultaneously reinforcing and prolonging the cultural significance of their predecessors. While both reboots and spin-offs are derived from old media texts, they are essentially future-oriented and invested in creating a new media product. This is not exactly the case with reruns, reunions, and revivals, however, which are structured around the repetition or renewal of canceled shows and involve more complex temporal negotiations of past, present, and future.

Reruns used to be scheduled in “fringe time,” that is, before or after prime time, but since the emergence of boutique television in the 1980s, entire channels like Nick At Nite and TV Land base their brands on rerun programming (cf. Kompare 2005, 180–84). As Derek Kompare (2005) has shown, multiple reruns of *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957), *M\*A\*S\*H* (CBS, 1972–1983), and other series helped construct a “television heritage” that shaped (and continues to shape) personal and collective memories of the past. But reruns also complicate the temporal relationship between the media text and the viewer. Jenny L. Nelson (1990, 85) has argued that “the notions of past, present, and future dissolve in reruns of individual episodes which no longer follow a fixed chronology or linear development”—as, for example, when Monica Geller (Courtney Cox) and Chandler Bing (Matthew Perry) are just friends one day, and married the next, or when DJ Tanner (Candace Cameron Bure) attends elementary school when viewers tune in on Tuesday and high school on Friday. Freely mixed episodes notwithstanding, if a television show is experienced as rerun (and not as first run), the viewer’s attention is directed away from the media text itself to memories associated with the show, the era of its first run, or the viewer’s personal life during that time (Nelson 1990, 86). David Marc has suggested that the rerun

offers the sensation of traveling through time in one’s own life and cultural history. The recognizable, formulaic narrative releases the viewer from what become the superficial concerns of suspense and character development. Greater imaginative adventures through time, space, and culture take precedence over the flimsy mimesis that seems to be the intention of the scripts. (Marc 1984, 35)

The program itself and its temporal structure never change, but televisual and cultural codes as well as the viewer’s life and temporal vantage point do. Removed from its immediate first-run context of production and reception, repeated without linear, weekly progression, the television rerun strangely suspends characters, actors, and entire shows in time (cf. Nelson 1990).

Reunion shows and series revivals, I argue, give this temporal suspension an extra twist, as they seek to ground a past show once more in the present. Starting in the mid-1970s, in the wake of growing interest in television heritage, popular rerun series like *Father Knows Best* (CBS/NBC, 1954–1960), *Gilligan’s Island* (CBS, 1964–1967), and *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964–1966) brought together original cast members

for TV-movie reunions (Kompore 2005, 104). According to Ryan Lizardi (2014, 66), reunion “is the whole and sole reason” these shows exist, “with no promise or indication of further content to come.” In keeping with the TV series’ distinctive tone, style, and narrative structure, made-for-TV reunion movies provide a glimpse into the possible lives of familiar characters as in *The Father Knows Best Reunion* (1977) and *The Growing Pains Movie* (2000), they complete narrative arcs and resolve cliffhanger endings as in *Rescue from Gilligan’s Island* (1978) and *Project ALF* (1996), or they are designed as holiday-themed specials, which take a seasonal family get-together as the pretext to reunite cast members, for example, in *Halloween with the New Addams Family* (1977) and *A Very Brady Christmas* (1988).

The temporal positioning of these media texts depends to a great extent on the amount of time that has elapsed between the end of the series’ first run and its reunion show, but, once more, the viewing experience plays an equally determining role. Writing in 1986, Ronald Simon found reunion movies disappointing because the shows and characters they temporarily resurrected remained essentially the same as those the viewer knew from the past:

Except for a face lift or a sagging middle, nothing fundamentally has changed. The characters have not experienced the political and social upheavals that have affected every viewer’s life. They are stuck in a formula that does not allow the wisdom of aging. (Simon 1986, 55–56)

Reunion shows typically earned high ratings because their inherent promise of pleasure in recognition—of revisiting familiar faces doing familiar things—appeals to audiences. Due to the overwhelming presence of the series’ past, however, the one-off reunion show exists uncannily out of time, out of context, and therefore ultimately out of touch with the real world of the viewer’s present. It lingers in a nostalgic limbo, lacking relevance to either past or present.

When canceled television series are revived for a new run, they risk amplifying the nostalgic limbo effect. With regard to temporality, the main challenge lies in creating a comeback that is consistent with the show’s past but also manages to meaningfully ground the series revival in the present (ideally for an extended period of time). This applies as much to the television industry as it does to the media text and its audiences. As reunion shows flourished on American television, their high ratings indicated that series revivals, too, might be successful in attracting viewers. Series revivals are low-risk business ventures for the industry, a way to exploit an old property and derive new value from it (cf. Johnson 2015). The revival can easily be marketed to a built-in audience, who already knows what to expect, and this base of loyal viewers can further be expanded if the new series has multigenerational appeal. On the level of text, the revival needs to maintain narrative continuity with the past series while its premise must nonetheless warrant an entire new season (or more). Unlike the reunion show, the revival cannot afford to be out of step with the times if it wants to bind a multigenerational viewership to its new serialized content. Revivals must address the historical lapse of time and adjust to changes in prevailing televisual aesthetics and norms of

representation, which often involve complex negotiations between the nostalgic referent and its revived counterpart. As far as audiences are concerned, series revivals are increasingly steeped in expectations. If audiences greet the return of beloved characters with enthusiasm and excitement, there is usually also a sense of unease that cherished memories of the past might be overwritten by the new media texts (cf. Loock 2016; Williams 2015).

Early examples of series revivals in American television include *The New Leave It to Beaver* a.k.a. *Still the Beaver* (Disney Channel/TBS, 1983–1989), *What's Happening Now!!* (Synd., 1985–1988), and *The New WKRP in Cincinnati* (Synd., 1991–1993). These shows slightly alter the titles of their predecessors (which were hits in syndication), with temporal markers such as “the new,” “still,” or “now” distinguishing the revivals from the original series and firmly locating them in the present. Original cast members reprised their roles in the new series, which revolved around the adult lives of former child characters. Since the new millennium, revivals like *90210* (The CW, 2008–2013), *Melrose Place* (The CW, 2009–2010), and *Dallas* (TNT, 2012–2014) have brought back familiar leads, yet these new shows introduce a younger generation of characters and radically reimagine the original series (cf. Johnson 2015). It is striking that such wide-ranging generational overhauls are largely absent from *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *The X-Files*, *Arrested Development*, *Fuller House*, and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (as well as from upcoming revivals that follow in their vein). As I will show in the last section, this emphasis on the return of the entire cast is but one of the characteristics recent revivals share in common.

## Revivals: The Current Trend

TV series revivals are neither confined to our present moment nor to American television,<sup>4</sup> but the current trend marks a new intensity in revisiting popular media texts from the recent past. As I have pointed out, the contemporary media landscape helps explain the interest in bringing back old shows—to the extent that TV series revivals can, in fact, be considered a central feature of “peak TV.” A major power player in today’s overcrowded TV marketplace, the online streaming service Netflix emerged as the driving force of the revival trend, and—having experimented with *Arrested Development* in a highly innovative and risky way (as Julia Leyda demonstrates in her article here)—notably embraced the more conventional and conservative reactivation of family-friendly properties with *Fuller House* and the *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (which are the focus of my own and Ryan Lizardi’s articles, respectively). Netflix’s revival model might be unique in that it repackages and updates past media texts and TV experiences to promote a nostalgic and arguably less challenging mode of viewing (in terms of both form and content) in the present. But revivals are also attractive for American television networks that target different audiences with shows such as *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, two cult classics that once helped usher in “the era of complex television” (Mittell 2015). Unfolding decades after the original shows made their marks on American serial television, the revivals are concerned with throwing the gap between old and new into sharp

(yet brand-appropriate) relief in the case of *Twin Peaks: The Return* (as Matt Hills elaborates here), or with self-reflexively restaging well-established storytelling strategies in the case of *The X-Files* (as Felix Brinker argues in his article).

The revivals examined in this special issue could hardly be more different: ranging generically from mystery to drama to family sitcom, and with initial broadcast ranging from the 1980s to the 1990s to the 2000s. Yet, the trend indicates that neither the genre nor the specific televisual moment of the original series matter. All revivals discussed here have been particularly effective in generating buzz in the months and even years leading up to their premieres, their “heightened presence” (Gray 2010, 5) in the press and on social media serving to attract old and new audiences for the upcoming shows, and to construct a nostalgically inflected viewing context. For maybe more so than earlier revivals, these shows are driven by a desire to return to familiar places from the past and a sense of homecoming that is deeply inscribed into contemporary representations of Stars Hollow and the town of Twin Peaks, or the homes of the Bluth and Tanner families. On the surface, not much has changed regarding these settings, yet this apparent state of stasis puts the characters’ and, in extra-diegetic extension, the actors’, creators’, and viewers’ lived experience over time all the more into perspective—most prominently through references to the aging process and looks of characters/actors (especially in *Fuller House* and *Twin Peaks: The Return*), but also by exposing uneven star trajectories (in the case of Melissa McCarthy and Lauren Graham from *Gilmore Girls*, for instance), and by raising questions about TV auteurism (in particular, David Lynch’s auteur vision for the *Twin Peaks* revival, showrunner Mitchell Hurwitz’s experimental take on *Arrested Development*, and Amy Sherman-Palladino’s vested interest in revising the ending of *Gilmore Girls*). And, as revivals “synchronise the amount of time which has passed in our lives with that of the characters” (Henderson 2014, 166), they also speak to viewers’ feelings of generational belonging and the ways in which such temporally dispersed television shows can shape successive media generations by perpetuating televisual experiences, memories, and attachments.<sup>5</sup> Considering the baggage of televisual heritage and complex negotiations of temporality at work, it comes as no surprise that the current revival trend has produced shows that are astutely aware of their position in the popular culture imaginary and thrive on self-referential maneuvers.

This special issue begins with Matt Hills’s article, which explores the concept of generational seriality by analyzing the “gap” between *Twin Peaks* and *Twin Peaks: The Return* as a temporally and textually destabilizing challenge to fan expectations. Hills examines representations of aging and loss in *The Return*, and addresses how recap culture has shaped the revival’s generational meanings. Next, Felix Brinker enters into dialogue with Hills’s article, similarly exploring a cult TV show of the 1990s and its comeback in a radically altered American media landscape. Brinker takes a narratological approach, arguing that the limited-run revival of *The X-Files* in 2016 affected the show’s trademark serial strategies and storytelling techniques so that they no longer functioned to foster long-term viewer engagement but to establish continuity and self-reflexive ties with past seasons of the show. Julia Leyda expands the discussion to explore the role of Netflix as a major engine behind the revival trend. The 2013



continuation of *Arrested Development* on Netflix, Leyda argues, coincided with the TV industry's shift from ratings-sensitive broadcasting to narrowcasting on streaming and on-demand platforms and the simultaneous financialization of domestic space in the context of the U.S. housing crisis. In my own article, I turn to the 2016 revival of the beloved but critically panned sitcom *Full House* to examine Netflix's strategic efforts to revive the bygone days of TGIF-style programming of the 1980s and 1990s and reinvent family-friendly viewing in the present. I demonstrate how Netflix frames *Fuller House* as an alternative to contemporary television's complex dramas and edgy sitcoms in its #TGIAnytime campaign, and explore the ways in which the revival engages in postfeminist discourse and raises pertinent questions about family values, gender roles, and ethnic diversity. Ryan Lizardi finally concludes the discussion of Netflix with a case study of the 2016 comeback of *Gilmore Girls* that foregrounds contemporary media's commodification of memory and nostalgia. By addressing the contradictory goals of conclusion and continuity that inform this revival, Lizardi brings the special issue's exploration of contemporary American TV series revivals full circle.

Together, these articles seek to interrogate the significance of contemporary TV series revivals and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the industrial, cultural, and textual practices involved. They are a timely intervention into current debates about the role television and new media play in our lives, and the ways in which enduring media texts can shape processes of identity formation and media-generational positioning. If "the ending is over," as Zoe Williams (2017) proclaims, if series transcend their textual death and continue to matter, we need to understand how and why this is so and examine the cultural, political, and social implications of their prolonged existence and popularity.

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### Notes

1. The list continues to grow, with the return of *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998–2006) and *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997) slated for 2017 and 2018, for example.
2. Scholars also refer to reactivations of canceled series as "resurrections" and "rebirths" (e.g., Mittell 2015; Williams 2015).
3. Constantine Verevis (2006, 38–57) and Carlen Lavigne (2014) discuss such instances as television remakes.

4. The United Kingdom has a long tradition of TV series revivals. *The Likely Lads* (BBC, 1964–1966), for instance, was followed by *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads* (BBC, 1973–1974) and a feature film in 1976, and *Open All Hours* (BBC, 1976–1986) has recently been revived as *Still Open All Hours* (BBC, 2013–).
5. On the concept of media generations, see Bolin (2017) and Matt Hills's article in this special issue. Henderson (2014) makes his point with regard to the film sequel but it is also valid here because of the temporal difference between original series and revival.

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