TheView

In the past year, networks have rebooted (clockwise from top left)
Full House, The X-Files, The Muppets *and* Heroes

ENTERTAINMENT

Our nostalgia obsession is killing TV

By Daniel D'Addario

ON A DARK STREET IN A FICTIONAL town, two FBI agents in search of a supernatural beast—a giant alien lizard, to be precise—are interrogating a prostitute who managed to beat it off with her purse. The woman (played by drag queen Shangela) says the creature was wearing "tighty-whities, the same kind I used to wear." Then, out of nowhere, she reveals that she's transgender. Thanks to her wild story, she adds, local law enforcement "think I'm on crack." A moment later, she admits that she is.

This exchange, from an episode of *The X-Files,* is among the most offensive ways to present a transgender character on TV, implying that her only defining qualities are sex work, hard drug use and a frank willingness to talk about her transition. If it had

happened during *The X-Files*' first season, we'd look back at it as the worst, laziest sort of stereotype—and emblematic of its time (1993). But this episode aired for the first time just a few weeks ago, as part of a series "reboot" on Fox. And it's in alarmingly good company.

Desperate to break through in a crowded market, TV networks are increasingly trying to revive old hits instead of making new ones. In the past few months, we've gotten rehashed versions of *Heroes, The Muppets, The X-Files* and *Full House.* Soon we'll get *Gilmore Girls, Prison Break* and many more. These days it's safe to assume that no cancellation is ever truly final.

Superficially, the appeal is clear. For fans, reboots offer a chance to spend more time with once-beloved

characters; for networks, they guarantee interest from audiences and the media, at least at first. This is the same logic that drives the film industry to spend billions reviving franchises like *Star Wars, Jurassic Park* and *Zoolander.*

But television is, or should be, different. Whereas movies are one-off spectacles, TV is immediate and intimate, created in a matter of days (or even hours) and broadcast directly into people's living rooms. This offers a singular opportunity to reflect modern society and—like so many of TV's best, most popular shows—to push it forward. Consider *I Love Lucy,* which helped normalize the idea of interracial marriage; *Star Trek,* whose diverse cast of idealists mirrored civil rights activists on Earth; and *Modern Family,* whose relatable gay couple softened conservative opposition to same-sex marriage.

Yet even the best TV cannot and should not live forever. Shows like *Full House* and *The X-Files* were created at specific times to capture specific zeitgeists, and they did so admirably. But the world has changed. And turning them back into must-see TV requires a lot more than ham-fisted iPhone jokes and poorly conceived transgender plotlines.

Or so say the viewers. *The Muppets* and *Heroes Reborn* have been huge ratings disappointments for ABC and NBC, respectively, ending their seasons with fewer than 4 million viewers a week. The *X-Files* miniseries fared slightly better but nonetheless saw ratings plummet more than 50% through its six-episode run. And although Netflix doesn't release viewership numbers, public response to *Fuller House* has been overwhelmingly tepid, so much so that Seth Meyers made a joke of reading bad reviews to series guest star John Stamos. Meanwhile, *Empire*—a show created in 2015 to address contemporary issues like homophobia and racism—remains one of the most watched dramas on television.

Nonetheless, we're on track to retread more old ground in prime time. CBS is working on a *MacGyver* revival, Showtime is bringing back cult hit *Twin Peaks,* and NBC is returning to antiquity with *Xena: Warrior Princess.* All of these shows will siphon money from programming budgets, preventing shows that are better—or at least fresher—from getting made.

Perhaps, though, there's a middle ground to be found. Whereas *Fuller House* and *The X-Files* relied heavily on familiar characters, Fox's upcoming *24: Legacy* will replace its signature lead (Kiefer Sutherland) with Corey Hawkins, one of the stars of *Straight Outta Compton.* While it's too early to guess at what the storytelling will look like, the show's willingness to prioritize originality over fan service is a step in the right direction. For once it's not a reboot; it's a reinvention. ☐

VERBATIM

'It's not a man, woman, race, class thang! It's a Ghostbuster thang! And as far as I'm concerned, we all Ghostbusters!'

LESLIE JONES, star of the new *Ghostbusters,* in a tweet after a trailer revealed that her character is a subway worker, which some alleged was a racist stereotype

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BOOK IN BRIEF
The Math Myth

ASK EXPERTS HOW TO FIX AMERICAN education and you'll hear the same answer again and again: more courses in STEM—or science, technology, engineering and math. In his new book, Andrew Hacker takes issue with that idea—specifically, mandating geometry, calculus and trigonometry. These subjects are not only unnecessary for most careers, he argues, but so difficult that they can turn people off education entirely. Research shows that struggling with math requirements is the No. 1 academic reason students don't finish high school or college—even if they're pursuing degrees in art or cosmetology. Of course, this doesn't mean U.S. schools shouldn't improve math programs; it's important for students to master arithmetic and basic algebra (think: solve for x). But overly tough expectations have created "intractable barriers for students whose aptitudes lie outside of mathematics," Hacker writes. And that's a problem, he concludes, not a solution. —SARAH BEGLEY
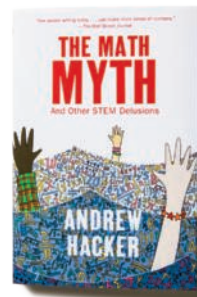
CHARTOON
Smartphone vs. dog

answers if called
plays games
sleeps when inactive
handy alarm
occasionally falls in the toilet
doesn't shed

answers if called
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handy alarm
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doesn't pocket dial your ex

JOHN ATKINSON, WRONG HANDS