
A Lazy Form of Betrayal: The ‘Remake’ and ‘Reboot’ in American Television Animation

By David Perlmutter

I have always considered remakes a bad idea.

This is the result of a number of converging concerns with the concept. When we “remake” or “reboot” something, the implication is that something was “wrong” with the original version, which the makers are implying that they wish to “fix”. It doesn’t matter how old it was- it needs to be done again because they didn’t do it right the first time. Regardless of how successful it was, commercially or artistically, the first time. Because, when the potential for money to be made from an actual or potential franchise, in any form of artistic endeavor, money matters more than art. We’d be deluding ourselves if we thought otherwise.

The baby boomers, my parents’ generation, seems to have a particularly fatalistic obsession with the “remake”. They pretend to “honor” the popular culture of the past by presenting “faithful” and “new” versions of the films and television shows they admired as children, but all they are doing is discrediting and marginalizing the importance of the source material. And, in nearly every instance, the original version of the material is infinitely superior to any mercenary attempt to do the material “over” ten or twenty years after. By, it should be said, people who do not have the emotional and artistic commitment to the work the original producers had, and are doing only for the money and/or because they were told to do so by the people who hold their jobs by a thread upstairs.

I come to this debate as someone who was taught that the most valuable contributions to society, particularly in the arts, are original ones. People who follow their own instincts, present their own ideas, and deliver them to the public with unique personal verve and brio will always matter in my mind more than the vast mob of people who make those same things just to fill screen space.

My particular interest as a popular cultural historian- and, loosely defined, a “fan”- has been animation. Specifically, animation produced for consumption on television in North America. I came to this subject firstly because I admire the characters and producers of the work and greatly, but also because there is a vast lack of scholarly materials, and thus academic knowledge, study and respect, on the topic. For the past decade or so, I have tried to create objective public knowledge of the topic as a writer on the genre. In 2014, I published America ‘Toons In, a

comprehensive historical study of television animation in the United States, and I am currently working on an encyclopedic study of the same topic. I say this not to boast about credentials, but to indicate that I have acted out of the same concerns as other non-fiction writers have on their topics: so that others will understand the topic and why it does and should matter to people besides ourselves.

But how can this possibly be done when you are dealing with an entertainment genre that, for better or worse, tends to cannibalize its best ideas in “remakes” and “reboots” because it lacks the resources and courage to produce original material?

Cartoon Network displayed this brazenly when it chose to do a “new” version of *The Powerpuff Girls*, which, artistically, is one of the great holy grails of the genre. The original series idea of making kindergarten-age children superheroes was brilliant to my eyes when it debuted in 1998, and that they were girls was doubly brilliant. These remain underprivileged and voiceless parts of our community, and to give them the kind of hope for improvement that both super-heroics and animation was a masterstroke in a media empire that often ignores their very existence. But the idea might not have worked nearly as well had Craig McCracken, the series’ skilled but enigmatic creator, been willing to devote himself so fully to challenge the production and dramatic clichés of television animation to produce something that had never been seen before there, and has only rarely been seen since. There are not many series that have created such change in a genre often unwilling to do so, and few producers with McCracken’s courage to do such things in a uniquely personal and identifiable way, as his later productions, *Foster’s Home For Imaginary Friends* and *1*, have further underlined.

In the case of the “new” version, a production is being done only on the worst possible terms for a media property. A very personal and extremely emotional version of the world has been tarnished for the simple expedient to make money by those who “own” the copyright in a legal sense, and not a moral one. In that sense, it becomes like any remake: a creatively weak endeavor undertaken only to fill space on a schedule where only its esteemed predecessor should be shown.

This is the great catch-22 of television animation. Animators can only produce material if they have access to the means of production, but, even if they have the means to produce brilliant things, they find they cannot control the destiny of their work after the work ceases to be done because, unlike other creators, they are denied control of the copyrights on their work. The people who have the least to benefit from exploiting the work benefit the most, and those who have the most suffer.

Television animation has been full of wonderful, one of a kind programs over its existence, which came into existence often against the opposition of those who hated their central ideas. And it still is. Those who operate the finances of the television industry should be made aware that profit is not the central motivating force of the business. It never has been. If we deny individual artists the chance to pursue their particular goals in this genre, in favor of always doing zombie-style resurrection of other people's old ones, we risk turning the genre's lifeblood cold and dead forever.

The characters of television animation, so full of life and spirit and defiance as they are, deserve better than that. Much better.

Notes on Contributor

David Perlmutter is a freelance writer based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The holder of an MA degree from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, and a lifelong animation fan, he has published short fiction in a variety of genres for various magazines and anthologies, as well as essays on his favorite topics for similar publishers, including SFF World.com. He is the author of *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation* (McFarland and Co.), *The Singular Adventures Of Jefferson Ball* (Chupa Cabra House), *The Pups* (Booklocker.com), *Certain Private Conversations and Other Stories* (Aurora Publishing), and *Orthicon; or, the History of a Bad Idea* (Linkville Press, forthcoming). He can be reached on Facebook at David Perlmutter-Writer, Twitter at @DKPLJW1, and Tumblr at The Musings of David Perlmutter (yesdavidperlmutterfan).