

# INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATING THE CW

---

MÉLANIE BOURDAA  
CLAIRE CORNILLON  
SHANNON WELLS-LASSAGNE

Scholarship focusing on channels like HBO (Jones 2008, Leverette et al. 2008), MTV (Banks 1996, Denisoff 2017), or Lifetime (Newman and Witsel 2016) – not to mention the rapidly developing cottage industry of Netflix analyses (Keating 2012, Barker and Wiatrowski 2017, Jenner 2018) – reveals the degree of academic interest in television's post-network niche marketing. While television studies has focused on subscription cable and streaming productions, free-to-air network shows have largely been left aside, particularly in France, where all our contributors are based. This is one of the reasons we decided to organize a symposium on the latest of the American networks, The CW, and to publish some of the more exemplary examples from that research in this issue of *Series*.

The aim of this collection is to understand the importance of The CW in the American televisual landscape today, and to point out both the specificities of this network and the extent to which it functioned as echo and indeed harbinger of television's rapid evolutions. Very little work has been done on this network's series, despite being among the most innovative in terms of marketing and audience relations, and thus worthy of study in their own right. A case study of The CW allows us to analyze these little-studied series, and to blend approaches that may help us understand this type of fiction.

Formed in 2005 from the merger of The WB and UPN (under the aegis of CBS and Warner Bros., the C and W of its moniker), The CW initially seemed to take on the identifying

characteristics of its predecessors. Both networks followed FOX's lead in creating content suited for a niche market, a strategy made profitable by the fragmentation of the market with the rise of cable television. The WB thus "target[ed] programming specifically to teens and young adults", while UPN "adopt[ed] 'black block' programming" (Ross and Stein 2008: 15) and the new network initially broadcast shows from both channels. As our contributor Anaïs Lefèvre-Berthelot reminds us, this dual focus soon grew even narrower, as the network broadcast fiction intended to appeal to young women<sup>1</sup>, before new president Mark Pedowitz chose to focus programming on the wider audience available in superhero fictions based on DC comics, a change detailed in the article by Charles Joseph. Over the years of its existence, The CW has indeed come to establish its own identity; Florent Favard uses the sole example of programming that pre-dates the channel itself – long-running scifi/horror show *Supernatural* – to chart the channel's evolution from its earliest days.

The upstart network's ongoing commitment to niche audiences was accompanied from its foundation by transmedia marketing. Indeed, given its inception as a market for ancillary advertising of content owned by the same conglomerate – such as Warner Bros.'s ownership of DC Comics – we could say that transmedia programming is inherent to The CW's very nature. In many cases, this transmedial strategy relies heavily on new digital media and social media, making the network one of the more successful adaptations to the ever-changing context of television, especially with the rise of VOD and streaming services. There has been ample documentation of the way these two aspects pushed the television industry to reorganize itself, and it is clear that we are now only at the beginning of these changes. The CW seized this context as an opportunity and negotiated the transition towards the release of content on the Internet and towards an increasing dialogue with audiences. It did so by making its youth-oriented shows available on The CW's own streaming platforms, *cwTV.com*, and pay streaming services like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime; by making its archives and web-exclusive shows available on streaming platform *CWSeed*; and by multiplying the presence of content creators on social media and bonus materials online. Through innovative broadcasting choices and ground-breaking deals with Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, The CW has found

1 "The three-year-old television network is betting its future on the whims of young women, almost to the exclusion of everybody else. By designing a schedule that appeals to them, the CW hopes to build an identity where there really hasn't been one in the three years that it's been operating" (Bauder 2009).

an efficient model in the quickly changing environment of contemporary television.

Analyzing the history of The CW and its principal fictions reveals that the network has built a specific identity. It is an identity based less in genres, formats or style, but more in the network's way of addressing its specific and very engaged audience. The CW is perhaps the most successful network in recent history to have created content associated with cult television (with its attendant benefit of loyal fans). As Catherine Johnson reminds us, this has long been a strategy for broadcast and cable networks:

Increasingly, network US television has actively attempted to create cult television with programmes and marketing strategies designed to encourage and reward loyal viewing and active participation. As such, cult television and fan audiences are no longer understood by the industry as marginal, atypical, or simply irrelevant. As the example of *Lost* demonstrates, the networks appeal to the 'fan' in all viewers, encouraging fan activity and loyalty as a part of television spectatorship in an era when multi-media participation is increasingly becoming the norm. (Johnson 2010: 144)

Definitions of cult objects vary, from Umberto Eco's ideas about quotability and archetypes (Eco 1985) to Matt Hills's suggestion that cult objects are dependent on hyperdiegesis and an endlessly deferred narrative (Hills 2002). However, in line with the narrowcasting that has dominated the television landscape in a post-network era, The CW seems to have chosen to foreground content that provokes fan participation, creating a cult network. This proximity to its viewers (or rather, the proximity of viewers to their content) is characteristic of this drive, as Philippe Leguern reminds us. "Whereas the museum presents objects removed from private appropriation and intended for appreciation at a distance," he writes, "cultism entails intervention by the audience, where the show takes place as much in the auditorium as it does on the screen" (Leguern 2004: 10). As such, The CW perhaps succeeds in creating the "cult culture" Eco spoke of in 1985 (Eco 1985: 12). The diversity and originality of its programming has attracted an audience that is perhaps smaller than those garnered by the larger networks, but which has proven itself fiercely loyal to the channel. Indeed, by being the only channel to have renewed the entirety of its series in 2016, The CW staked its future on reinforcing this relationship with its fans.

One of the ways The CW has ensured such brand loyalty is through programming that foregrounds diversity, a fact that distinguishes it from other networks where this representation is often minimal. Under Pedowitz's tenure, the network expanded its target audience beyond young women, showrunners foregrounding race, gender, and sexual orientation in their discourse with viewers. Although this identification with gay characters in particular has not been without blunders<sup>2</sup>, The CW's progressive programming has, overall, successfully appealed to what Ron Becker has termed "slumpies" – socially liberal, urban-minded professionals (Becker 2006) – who make up a significant portion of its viewing audience.

Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt remind us that, in contrast to cult films,

Cult TV fandom [...] focuses on ideas and imagination, rather than on taboo material. This leads to a language based on originality and invention instead of independence, subversion, or resistance, and results in a tendency to draw on the legitimate rather than the avant-garde, particularly as regards literary values. The persistent interest in scripts and the ways in which they develop characters and story lines shows the insistence on literary values, as does the concern with the devices and techniques of storytelling. (Jancovich and Hunt 2004: 35)

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that The CW has distinguished itself in its serial narrative innovations. By expanding the DC Comics television universe with five series in production concurrently (chronologically, *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, *Supergirl* – which left CBS for the CW in the fall of 2016 – and, most recently, *Black Lightning*), the channel has also created a complex and ambitious fictional and narrative universe. Recent cross-over events have proven the

---

2 Ironically this strategy of social progressiveness was the cause of some turmoil: in 2016, a lesbian character in *The 100*, Lexa, was killed by a stray bullet intended for her lover, Clarke. This event shocked the LGBTQ fanbase of the show for two reasons, one industrial and one narrative. First, showrunner Jason Rothenberg and his team queerbaited the audience on social media and forums, making Lexa the poster girl for season 3, and inciting fan debate around the couple. Narratively, killing this character was an example of the common television trope "Bury Your Gays", where homosexual characters are killed for the benefit of heterosexuals, conveying the message that homosexual relations necessarily end tragically. This specific event was a call for action for the lesbian fanbase who raised money for the Trevor Project and wrote a pledge asking for better representation in the media. But the CW's 2016 lineup famously maintained this narrative trope in its other shows like *The Vampire Diaries*, *Jane the Virgin* and *Supernatural*, though it has since been more attentive to these concerns.

vast possibilities of this fictional universe and the capacity of The CW to showcase its originality. In so doing, the channel recreated the notion of event television that was a pillar of the industry in the 1990s, ensuring that in order to follow the whole of the story, viewers were keeping their appointments with their favorite channel.

This creation of fan engagement through narrative innovation is coupled with a similar engagement through interaction with the shows themselves. As Catherine Johnson reminds us, "one of the defining features of a cult text is that it becomes a cult through its context of reception rather than through its context of production. It is not possible to produce a cult text. Ultimately texts can attain the status of a cult only through the activities of their fans" (Johnson 2010: 135). The case of *Supernatural*, in many ways the channel's flagship program, is a good example of the relationship between production and reception, as the engagement of the self-appointed "SPNFamily" is particularly striking. The network clearly tried to generalize what happened organically around *Supernatural* to all its new shows, especially with the *Arrowverse* and *Riverdale*, with some success. All of the channel's most popular series are very active on social media and the production of the show is well-documented for the fans day after day.

Choosing to focus on a television channel as a subject of study is necessarily an exercise in associating market forces and financial concerns with more aesthetic and artistic aims. The three articles chosen for this dossier consist of case studies, but which combine narrative analysis with production contexts in a way that allows us to better understand not only the series they discuss, but also the channel they represent. Anaïs Lefèvre-Berthelot's work on *Gossip Girl* foregrounds the woman-centric network typical of Dawn Ostroff's leadership, as well as the establishment of the transmedial processes that would later come to characterize the channel. Charles Joseph's analysis of the CW's *Arrowverse* focuses on the Pedowitz era of the network, the synergy of the primetime lineup and its efforts to stoke fan engagement. Finally, Florent Favard's article on the different periods of *Supernatural* in relation to the program's changing showrunners ultimately could be seen as a fiction emblematic of the channel as a whole, constantly reinventing itself as well as its approaches to television narrative. This dossier by no means pretends to be exhaustive in its approach to the fledgling network. We hope, however, that these articles provide a perspective on a channel that combines cable marketing strategies with network broadcast, and whose innovations remain underappreciated by a larger academic public.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, Jack (2018) *Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music (1996)*. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Barker, Cory, and Myc Wiatrowski (eds.) (2017). *The Age of Netflix: Critical Essays on Streaming Media, Digital Delivery and Instant Access*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland.
- Bauder, David (2009) "Young women are CW's core audience." *Boston Globe*, 11 March 2009. [http://archive.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2009/03/11/young\\_women\\_are\\_cws\\_core\\_audience/](http://archive.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2009/03/11/young_women_are_cws_core_audience/) (last accessed 14-12-18).
- Becker, Ron (2006). *Gay TV and Straight America*. New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press.
- Denisoff, R. Serge (2017). *Inside MTV*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Eco, Umberto (1985). "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage." *SubStance* 14(47): 3-12.
- Edgerton, Gary R., and Jeffrey P. Jones (eds.) (2008). *The Essential HBO Reader*. Lexington (KY): University Press of Kentucky.
- Matt Hills (2002). *Fan Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jancovich, Mark and Nathan Hunt (2004). "The Mainstream, Distinction, and Cult TV." In *Cult Television*, edited by Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, 27-44. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jenner, Mareike (2018). *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson, Catherine (2010). "Cult TV and the Television Industry." In *The Cult TV Book*, edited by Stacey Abbott, 135-147. Berkeley (CA): Soft Skull Press.
- Keating, Gina (2012). *Netflixed: The Epic Battle for America's Eyeballs*. New York: Penguin, 2012.
- Leguern, Philippe (2004). "Towards a Constructivist Approach to Media Cults." In *Cult Television*, edited by Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, 3-25. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Leverette, Marc et al. (eds.) (2008). *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*. New York: Routledge.
- Newman, Emily L. and Emily Witsell (eds.) (2016). *The Lifetime Network: Essays on "Television for Women" in the 21st Century*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland.
- Ross, Sharon Marie, and Louisa Ellen Stein (eds.) (2008). *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland.