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The Rise and Fall of the WB: *Dawson's Creek*, Intertextuality, and
Legitimation

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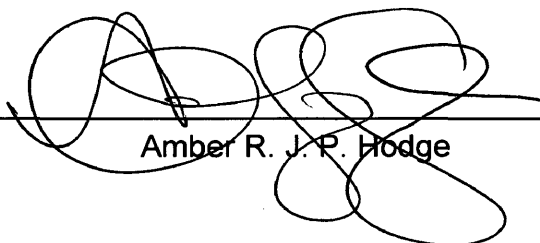
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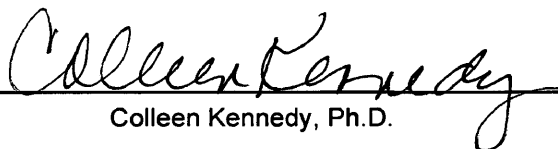
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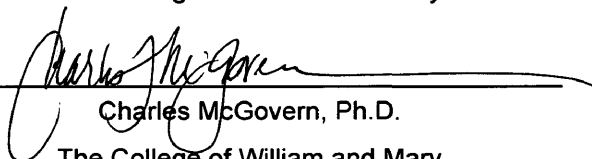
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ABSTRACT PAGE

Americans have always been divided generationally, from the Lost Generation and the Greatest Generation to the Baby Boomers and Generation X. Until September 11, 2001, the Millennial Generation ("Millennials") was only defined in relation to other demographic cohorts. A review of popular culture from 1998–2003, specifically television programming targeted to and embraced by the Millennials, demonstrates a search for legitimation at a time when this generation existed only in the context of others, with no obvious distinguishing characteristics. This paper will explore popular culture trends as a marker of broader social change in the context of the declining need of the Millennial Generation to define itself through popular culture (and earlier generations) when presented with its own "defining moment." By comparing trends in youth-oriented programming at the end of the 21st century to shows that premiered following the September 11 terrorist attacks, it becomes clear that popular culture begins to transform from a means of legitimation to a mechanism for escapism.

Introduction

As the twentieth century drew to a close, advertisers and rapidly expanding media outlets began to take notice of the size and associated buying power of the Millennial Generation (Millennials), the generation of Americans born between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s.¹ As a result, much was made of teen-oriented media in general and The Warner Brothers' Television Network ("the WB") in specific. Notable among the programming that gained popularity during this time was *Dawson's Creek*, a prime-time hit that self-consciously bridged the discourse between adult and youth themes and sensibilities. By focusing on its enhanced methods of commercialism, most studies chart the development of *Dawson's Creek* and its function through the use of advertising, product placement, and cross-over deals. However, by limiting the discussion strictly to *Dawson's* role in fostering consumerism, multiple, perhaps more pertinent, cultural developments are frequently ignored. This is not as much a function of flaws in contemporary discourse, as it is a result of limited scope.

Through reflection on the program as a complete entity, in light of the end of the series and the dissolution of the network on which it aired, various patterns emerge as representative of the show in particular and the social climate of American

¹ Stephanie F. Gardner, PharmD, EdD, "Preparing for the Nexters," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, August 15, 2006, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1636975/?tool=pmcentrez>. Neil Howe and William Strauss introduced this term in *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000). However, they defined the Millennial Generation as anyone born on or before 1982 (Howe and Strauss 2000, 4).

society in general. Notable among these themes are the use of intertextuality and nostalgia as means of establishing the legitimacy of popular culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. Charting themes in *Dawson's Creek* and the program's success, coupled with the subsequent decline of the WB, demonstrates trends in popular culture that coincide with larger historical trends. Teen-oriented programming sought to establish the legitimacy of youth discourse through mature dialogue, in turn legitimizing the Millennials as an audience. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the group seeking to forge an identity through popular culture now found itself with a great cause, one potentially similar to that faced by the "Greatest Generation" of World War II.² As a result, television programming moved sharply away from nostalgia and intertextuality to escapism and "reality," with an increasing emphasis on micronarratives. Ultimately, this shift in popular culture trends represents a larger historical transition that reflects the creation of a sense of a "place" in history for a new generation.

Definitions

It is worth noting that the *Millennial Generation* is also frequently referred to as Generation Y or the Echo Boomers, both of which define the Millennials solely by

² Immediately following the September 11 attacks, frequent comparisons were made between the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and the bombing of Pearl Harbor by echoing Roosevelt's "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy" speech. William Safire, "New Day of Infamy," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2001, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/opinion/12SAFI.html> is one example.

relating them to earlier generations of Gen X and the Baby Boomers respectively. Generations are never easily classified, though demographic experts can usually roughly agree on what timespan constitutes a particular generation. The most commonly accepted range of birth years for the Millennials starts around the mid-1970s (1976–1979) and ends around the mid-1990s (1994–1995).³ Because this research focuses on media trends of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when I refer to Millennials, I am speaking of the first half of the generation (those born between roughly 1977 and 1986).

Limiting the scope serves two purposes. First, it restricts the study to the segment of Millennials targeted by *Dawson's Creek* and the WB.⁴ I believe the generation is worth segmenting because the cultural experiences of the first and latter half of the generation were markedly different.⁵ For example, when early members of

³ Ellen Neuborne, "Generation Y," *BusinessWeek*, February 15, 1999, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.businessweek.com/1999/99_07/b3616001.htm. Nadira A. Hira, "Attracting the twentysomething worker," *Fortune*, May 15, 2007, accessed November 30, 2011, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2007/05/28/100033934/.

⁴ The WB's targeted Millennials and late Generation Xers. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Jamie Kellner, president of the WB said, "Our focus is 12-to-34-year-olds and that's it." Lawrie Mifflin, "A Sixth Night for WB, for Under 35's Only," *The New York Times*, May 19, 1999, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/19/arts/a-sixth-night-for-wb-for-under-35-s-only.html>.

⁵ The Millennials consider themselves to be disjointed. Ian Shapira interviewed a panel of Millennials to determine how the Millennial Generation defines itself. None of the interviewees were able to generate a definitive response. Ultimately, Michael Connery, author of the book *Youth To Power*, noted, "People resist labels more among the millennials because there's more subcultures... It's a fragmented culture in a way that it's never been." Ian Shapira, "What Comes Next After Generation X?," *The Washington Post*, July 6 2008, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/05/AR2008070501599.html>.

the Millennial Generation attended high school, smartphones and mp3 players were a rarity, and Facebook did not exist. Many of the early Millennials completed at least some of their high school education prior to the Columbine High School massacre (1999), the worst high school shooting rampage in American history. In contrast, by the time most of the late-stage Millennials entered high school, they had Facebook accounts and, depending on their parents' income level, mp3 players and smartphones as well. Additionally, they have no experience in middle or high school that has not been shaped (to some degree) by the presence of terrorist violence domestically which resulted from the Columbine massacre and the September 11 attacks.⁶

For the purpose of my study, *legitimation* is defined as the effort of an individual (text or person) or group (genre, generation, subset of population, etc.) to establish it or themselves as worthy of critical and historical response. Legitimation, in this case, establishes a program as “quality television,” that is, television that has an impact on mainstream culture and is critically successful, a status generally marked by the American public as reception in the awards circuit.⁷ My focus in this study is not the achievement of quality but, rather, what that bid for quality

⁶ Although most researchers mark the end of the Millennial Generation in the mid-1990s, “Generation Z” (Net/I Generation) is most frequently identified as beginning with those born 1991, indicating the fluidity of these definitions.

⁷ Although quality may be defined by the average television viewer as a positive critical reception or success on the awards circuit, television executives typically define quality through success, which is based on the amount of revenue a series generates for a network and studio. For showrunners, writers, and producers, a successful show is defined as “a show that is returning.” Jeffrey Stepakoff, *Billion Dollar Kiss: The Kiss That Saved Dawson’s Creek and Other Adventures in TV Writing* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007), 236.

represents. I believe that the struggle for legitimation conveyed in film and television during the late 1990s and early 2000s reflects the Millennials' struggle to become legitimized as a generation in its own right, rather than in relation to its predecessors.

Intertextuality is the tendency of a work to relate itself to other texts within a historical context and associated with Roland Barthes' concept that readers (in this case, viewers), not the work itself, create meaning for a text.⁸ One problem often encountered when studying mass-mediated "time-art" like television as opposed to a more static medium, such as literature, is the necessity to review text in a larger context because the medium is so manifestly not self-contained. Because this study necessitates a review of the social context in which *Dawson's Creek* emerges, I will also refer to several other programs. This will serve both as a means to establish a context for the study and as a method to support the trends evidenced in one program by uncovering similar themes in other shows.

Nostalgia and irony are also important concepts for this research. I draw on Linda Hutcheon's work in which nostalgia is defined as a longing for a past which is wholly inaccessible (possibly never existent) and more reflexive of modern values and desires than indicative of past events. Irony refers to the union of two meanings, said and unsaid, that unite in a critical way. Here, I will reflect specifically on the postmodern sense of irony as a response to nostalgia. Again, I call on Hutcheon's definition of irony "as the way in which nostalgia is made palatable today: invoked

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 144.

but, at the same time... seen for exactly what it is—a comment on the present as much as on the past.”⁹ The developing relationship between irony and nostalgia in popular culture is something that will be made clear in this review.

I will also discuss *micronarratives* in this study. In light of the rise of social media, I use the term “micronarrative” in the most narrow sense—the narrative of the individual. Essentially, I use the term to mean that adolescents are resisting a larger narrative by attempting to support (and create) stories that represent their interests and how they want to be perceived.¹⁰

Background

In 1970, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) established the financial interest and syndication rule (fin-syn). This rule limited the amount of programming the “Big Three” networks (Columbia Broadcasting System [CBS], National Broadcasting Company [NBC], and American Broadcasting Company [ABC]) could own and produce themselves, forcing them to go to a Hollywood studio or independent producers for the majority of their programming. In 1993, after significant lobbying by the Big Three, fin-syn was overturned by U.S. District Court Judge Manuel Real citing, among other things, the significant rise in cable television

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern*, University of Toronto English Library, University of Toronto, January 19, 1998, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>.

¹⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv-xxv.

stations, advancements in VCR technology, and the introduction of a fourth network, Fox Broadcasting Company (FOX).¹¹

Not only did this open the network landscape for major film studios, like Warner Brothers (a division of Time Warner), interested in entering the television business, it also heralded a new era in the medium. Networks, which could now have full ownership of the content they aired, would become more vested in generating network loyalty. As a result, networks made tremendous efforts to present their programming in such a way that the audience would associate all of the shows with one another—an effect achieved through marketing strategies as well as the deliberate use of the same actors across various programs. No network executed this strategy more completely than the WB.

The WB and the Legitimation of Teen Programming

The WB launched January 11, 1995 with a lineup centered on failed enterprises from other networks and primarily targeted to African Americans.¹² The fledgling network not only faced competition from the four established broadcasting companies, but premiered the same week as another start-up venture, the United Paramount Network (UPN). UPN not only leveraged ownership of the *Star Trek* by airing a new iteration of the tremendously popular franchise, but also offered to pay

¹¹ Susan Daniels and Cynthia Littleton, *Season Finale: The Unexpected Rise and Fall of the WB and UPN* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 18–19, 21–22.

¹² *Ibid*, 1, 5.

affiliates for air time, while the WB required payment from affiliates to broadcast their programming.¹³

Because they were former FOX employees who had participated in FOX's launch in 1987, the WB's founding executives were familiar with the trials associated with the development of a new network.¹⁴ The original line-up focused on comedies, including *The Wayans Brothers* and *Unhappily Ever After*, to maintain a low budget. At the time the WB premiered, most television programming was geared to an adult viewership (*ER*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends* were among the highest-rated shows on-air) with limited family-friendly or youth-oriented fare.¹⁵ With the success of the 1996 drama, *Savannah*, however, the WB decided to try a new approach, aiming a drama, the "adult" TV genre, at a younger and (at the time) neglected audience.¹⁶

A remake of the 1992 movie of the same name, Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, was shopped to several networks before reaching the WB.¹⁷

Producer Gail Berman became passionately involved with the project that centered on "female empowerment" and "teenage fears" in part because "there were no young

¹³ Ibid, 30–31.

¹⁴ Ron Martin, "A Fool's Utopia 3.11.10: A Look at FOX Sundays," 411mania.com, March 11, 2010, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.411mania.com/movies/columns/132334/A-Fool%5C%5Cs-Utopia-3.11.10:-A-Look-at-FOX-Sundays.htm>.

¹⁵ Staff writer, "TV Ratings 1995–1996," ClassicTVHits.com, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.classictvhits.com/tvratings/1995.htm>.

¹⁶ "By WB standard of the day, *Savannah* had a strong opening. More significant, it performed well with... teenage girls and young women in the 12–24 age bracket. All the arrows were pointing in the direction of the niche that we would come to identify as 'the WB demo' in the years ahead." (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 106)

¹⁷ This included FOX who, who cited a movement away from "teen-centric shows" as a reason for passing. (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 118–119)

female lead series other than *Blossom* on the air at the time.”¹⁸ *Buffy* was an early hit in 1997, and it laid the groundwork for *Dawson’s Creek* style (e.g., articulate, culturally-aware characters) and the creator’s role as auteur, but it differed from *Dawson’s* in that, although it had many elements of a character-driven show, most of the action was driven by supernatural circumstances.¹⁹ As Jeffrey Stepakoff, former writer for WB programming including *Dawson’s Creek*, explains in his autobiography, “After *Buffy*, the network’s identity came into clear focus... The WB now knew exactly who it was, and it programmed accordingly.”²⁰

Although *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was the WB’s first success story, it was the mid-season replacement *Dawson’s Creek*, which premiered January 20, 1998, that secured the future of the WB as a major network contender. By the end of its second season on air, following the unexpected success of ventures such as 7th *Heaven* and *Buffy*, the network was actively developing its “brand,” one that focused on female empowerment and, above all else, a core youth audience.²¹ Opening to a 41 share of the female teen audience,²² *Dawson’s Creek* propelled the WB to the height of its popularity, the peak of which was the 2000–2001 broadcast season.²³

¹⁸ Ibid, 118.

¹⁹ Ibid, 140,123.

²⁰ Stepakoff 2007, 208.

²¹ Former WB executive Susanne Daniels noted that a two-page photo spread, “The Women of the WB,” that ran in the 1998 year-end issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, “signified the WB’s ascent.” (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 193)

²² Daniels and Littleton 2007, 170.

²³ The WB brought in about \$700 million in advertising revenue in the first six months of 2001 (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 252). By June 2001, citing a glut in the teen television market, executives at FOX and the WB noted a downturn in the

The WB successfully became a “brand,” and *Dawson’s Creek*, with its high ratings, advertising revenue, and ardent fan-following, became the representative of that brand.²⁴ Stepakoff notes, “You could watch a WB show and know within seconds what network was broadcasting it. No other broadcast network had been able to create such a strong brand... WB shows had a very specific look, sound, and sensibility.”²⁵

As late as September 2004 (over a year after the Series Finale of *Dawson’s Creek* aired), critics continued to cite *Dawson’s Creek* as the catalyst for the mainstream popularity the WB achieved. Alessandra Stanley of *The New York Times* wrote that year, “The WB is turning out to be the television equivalent of the United Nations... [and] *Dawson’s Creek* was its Dag Hammarskjöld: It was the first series bold enough to pick up the mantle of *Beverly Hills, 90210* [1990–2000] and an inspiration for many variations on the teenage angst theme, including *The O.C.* on FOX.”²⁶ Stanley also referred to *Dawson’s* as “the mother of all high school dramas.”²⁷

development of programming targeted at the teen audience. Josh Wolk, Ethan Alter, Chris Willman, “Pop Goes the Teen Boom?,” *Entertainment Weekly*, June 8, 2001, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,256597,00.html>.

²⁴ “*Dawson’s Creek* was run much more by the network that aired it than the company that made it. It was molded by the network’s input. It conformed to their brand.” (Stepakoff 2007, 234)

²⁵ *Ibid*, 208.

²⁶ Alessandra Stanley, “A President-to-Be and His Rosebud,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2004, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://tv.nytimes.com/2004/09/10/arts/television/10TVWK.html>.

²⁷ Alessandra Stanley, “The TV Watch: The Ancient Days of Teenage Drama,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2004, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes>

As the WB approached its tenth anniversary in 2005 it was recording its lowest ratings yet, falling behind UPN for the first time in either network's history.²⁸ Attempts were made to restructure the network. These included: an increase in reality programming;²⁹ promotion of new dramas with similar theme and content to successful programming like *Dawson's Creek*, most notably *One Tree Hill* [2003–2012], the most successful drama released by the WB since its ratings peak, but with ratings far below that of *Dawson's Creek*;³⁰ and the abandonment of their original mascot, Michigan J. Frog, to appeal to a larger audience.³¹ However, as of the 2005–2006 season, none were successful. As a result, the WB merged with UPN September 2006 to create a new network, The CW, whose lineup was created as a combination of the most successful programming offered by each of the two stations.³² As shows

.com/2004/04/02/movies/the-tv-watch-the-ancient-days-of-teenage-drama.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm.

²⁸ John Consoli, "UPN's Start-of-Week Blues," *Mediaweek*, October 25, 2004, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.allbusiness.com/services/business-services-miscellaneous-business/4827987-1.html>. Interestingly, with the release of a new fall line-up, including *Jack and Bobby* and *The Mountain*, both cancelled after their first season, by the 2004–2005 season the median age of the WB's viewers was in the "30ish" range. (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 327)

²⁹ Although "reality" television existed in earnest since the late 1980s (*COPS* premiered in 1989 and *The Real World* debuted in 1992), it began to gain mainstream popularity in 2000, when studios began to seek out and distribute new ventures that did not require union staff writers that year. The Writer's Guild contract was in renegotiation, and a strike seemed inevitable. (Stepakoff 2007, 285)

³⁰ Kate Arthur, "Teenage Girls Lift Soapy Drama From Slump," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2005, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/25/arts/television/25tree.html>.

³¹ Daniels and Littleton 2007, 327.

³² Bill Carter, "With Focus on Youth, 2 Small TV Networks Unite," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2006, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/business/25network.html?ex=1295845200&en=46c9a6e1a9a67c3a&ei=5>

that originally came from the WB or UPN aged and went off the air, they were replaced with new programming, once again largely teen-oriented, but with vastly different themes and ideals for a new generation of viewers.

Dawson's Creek

Dawson's Creek premiered at the height of popularity for adult-oriented programs, such as *Friends* and just as *Beverly Hills, 90210*, arguably the most-groundbreaking teen-oriented show of the 1990s, entered its decline.³³ This created a unique atmosphere and target market for teenagers, who had few points of reference with which to track their own personal experience in popular media. *Beverly Hills, 90210* was a huge mainstream success, but was often critically dismissed as a soap opera due to the age of its actors, who in no way physically represented the high school students they were supposed to portray, and the show's Beverly Hills setting, which was pure fantasy to middle to low-income teenagers.³⁴

088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss. Unlike other networks, "CW" is not an abbreviation. The network's full name is "The CW Television Network." The letters are taken from the first letters of the parent corporations of UPN and the WB, "CBS Corporation" and "Warner Brothers."

³³ Stepakoff 2007, 208.

³⁴ Staff writer, "How Gabrielle Carteris Lied About Her '90210' Age," *Access Hollywood*, March 21, 2011, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.accesshollywood.com/gabrielle-carteris-lied-about-being-29-when-cast-in-beverly-hills-90210_article_45492.; Michael Quintanilla, "False Impressions: Trends: Real Beverly Hills kids say they like '90210' and its plots. What they don't like is being portrayed as snobs," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1991, accessed November 30, 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/1991-10-03/news/vw-4511_1_beverly-hills-high.

Aside from *90210*, most teen programming in the early 1990s was restricted to comedies, such as Saturday morning favorite, *Saved by the Bell*.³⁵ The shows that did deal with more realistic and, frequently, darker themes related to adolescence didn't survive long, as was the case with *My So-Called Life*.³⁶ Not only did *Dawson's Creek* provide a youthful cast, but its storylines related to a much broader audience, both at a socioeconomic level and, for the most part, were a more realistic representation of the adolescent experience. I mean *realistic representation of the adolescent experience* as a relative descriptive: something more realistic than other offerings of the time. *Dawson's Creek* represents the experience of lower to middle class (predominately white) adolescents in the suburbs, covering topics such as popularity, first love, divorce, and financing college.³⁷ Partly because of this "realism," *Dawson's Creek* was able to attract a more adult audience through specific references to the teenage experience of the early 1980s, attributed largely to creator Kevin Williamson's own experience as a teenager during that era.³⁸

³⁵ In addition to *Saved by the Bell*, a number of teen-oriented sitcoms aired on the major networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX) for more than one season between 1990 and 1994, including *Parker Lewis Can't Lose* (1990–1993), *Blossom* (1991–1995), *California Dreams* (1992–1996), and *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000). By contrast, the only dramas targeted to teens and young adults that aired during that period (aside from *90210*) were *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993) and *Party of Five* (1994–2000).

³⁶ Glyn Davis, "'Saying it Out Loud': Revealing Television's Queer Teens," in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 137.

³⁷ Stepakoff 2007, 240–241; A number of studies have been dedicated to the implications of the representation of minorities on the WB. However, for the purposes of limiting my scope, I will address the cultural, rather than sociological, implications of *Dawson's Creek* and the WB.

³⁸ Clare Birchall, "'Feels Like Home': *Dawson's Creek*, Nostalgia and the Young

Industry serials, such as *Entertainment Weekly* and *Variety*, heralded *Dawson's Creek* as signifying the arrival of the WB as a major broadcast network.³⁹ Advertised heavily and extensively before its original air date, the show was an immediate hit with critics and, in addition to having the highest rated debut in the history of the network, during its final season was the second highest-rated program in the 18–34 demographic (behind family favorite *7th Heaven*).⁴⁰ This helped establish the WB as the number one TV network among the 12–34 demographic, which, in 1998, was comprised of 76 million people who spent more than 141 billion dollars in that year alone.⁴¹ A subset of this audience, 12–24 year olds, was considered by advertisers “the most elusive and hard to reach” but also most

Adult Viewer,” in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, eds. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 178; (Daniels and Littleton 2007, 129)

³⁹ Cover, “The hot stars of *Dawson's Creek*,” *TV Guide*, March 7, 1998; Cover, “Fall TV Preview: Your Guide to Fresh Faces and Old Favorites,” September 11, 1998; A glowing review was also printed in *Variety*, “With “Dawson's Creek,” Williamson brings to the WB a mega-marketable show that plays like a cinematic pheromone.” Ray Richmond, “Dawson's Creek,” *Variety*, January 19, 1998, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117436782?refCatId=32> .

⁴⁰ Michael Schneider, “Dawson's Creek' Dries Up After Five Years on WB,” *Variety*, February 2, 2003, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.fansofrealitytv.com/forums/non-reality-shows/4513-dawsons-creek-dries-up-after-five-years-wb.html>. WB entertainment president Jordan Levin went as far to say, “We will always carry an emotional attachment to 'Dawson's Creek,' for without it the WB would not exist.” (Ibid)

⁴¹ Valerie Wee, “Teen Television and the WB Television Network” in *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom*, eds. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 46.

important, in part because brand decisions made during this time are typically upheld for a lifetime.⁴²

Marketed as “the end of something simple, the beginning of everything else,” the show centered on the trials and tribulations of growing up in small-town America.⁴³ *Dawson’s* focus was the friendship of four main characters, Dawson Leery, Josephine (Joey) Potter, Pacey Witter, and Jennifer (Jen) Lindley. Dawson, the title character and an aspiring filmmaker, represented youthful naivety and optimism via his enduring “Peter Pan Complex” and consistent status as the all-American poster boy for the functional American family.⁴⁴ Joey was the girl from the “wrong side of the tracks” being raised by her sister, Bessie, and her sister’s African American boyfriend after her mother died and her father was imprisoned for drug violations. Interestingly, despite the show’s title, Joey was the only one of the four central characters to appear in all 128 episodes of the series, lending support to the argument that the WB was especially interested in targeting women during that period.

Despite her disadvantaged upbringing, Joey excelled in school, but was extremely anti-“in crowd” and, almost exclusively, spent her time with fellow social outsiders, Dawson and Pacey. Her growing attraction to Dawson was the basis for most of the conflict in Season One. Like Joey, Pacey also came from a working-class

⁴² Wee 2008, 47.

⁴³ “*Dawson’s Creek*: Show Overview,” TV.com, June 18, 2005, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.tv.com/shows/dawsons-creek/>.

⁴⁴ The phrase “Peter Pan complex” was used throughout the series, first appearing in the pilot episode.

background. He was an underachiever in school, considered the “class clown,” and often used wit and sarcasm to compensate for the insecurities he felt as a result of a heated relationship with an emotionally abusive father. Pacey, in many ways, served as the foil to Dawson, despite their friendship, which served as another of the series’ foundations. The character of Jen was introduced as a newcomer in the pilot episode, sent from New York under the auspice of caring for her dying grandfather when, in actuality, her parents, urban professionals, could not deal with her promiscuity and use of recreational drugs. The dangerous newcomer literally became Dawson’s “girl-next-door” and his attraction to her complicated the romantic conflict created by Joey’s developing feelings for her. Jack and Andrea (Andie) McPhee were introduced in Season Two as upper-class children from a successful family, and the show soon followed a few melodramatic story arcs, ostensibly to maintain ratings in what is traditionally a slump during the sophomore season.⁴⁵ By the middle of Season Three, however, *Dawson’s Creek* returned to its largely character-driven roots, focusing on a new love triangle that would serve as the driving force for the remainder of the series, the relationships between Joey, Dawson, and Pacey.⁴⁶

Dawson’s Creek is particularly suitable as a case study for three primary reasons: its nostalgic predisposition (evidenced by the white-washed, rural setting and frequent reference to persons or programs more commonly associated with the parents of the Millennials); its hyper-awareness of the perception of its characters and

⁴⁵ Stepakoff 2007, 241.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 243.

characters/plotlines from other shows on the WB (both via self-reflection and commentary on contemporary programming); and its tendency toward multi-venue product exchange and placement (in the context of character exchange with film and other television shows, as well as direct marketing of clothing and music).⁴⁷

All three of these qualities can be encompassed by the broader theme of “cultural awareness.” *Dawson’s Creek* often referenced popular, commercial, and intellectual culture, past and present, creating a frame of reference in which to interpret the storylines as they progress. The landmark themes presented on *Dawson’s Creek* served as a model for subsequent programming on the WB and other networks.⁴⁸ The show was also praised (and often criticized by conservative organizations, such as the Parents Television Council) for tackling difficult themes directly.⁴⁹ For example, *Dawson’s Creek* featured the first passionate on-screen gay kiss almost two years after the now landmark sitcom *Will & Grace* premiered.⁵⁰ *Dawson’s* “cultural awareness” and willingness to address relevant, if not controversial, themes makes it an especially amenable way in which to view the culture at large during the period of its run.

⁴⁷ Birchall 2004, 176–8; Although I will not address all of these topics in depth here, they are the reasons scholars who have examined *Dawson’s Creek* most commonly give for reviewing that show, as opposed to any other program on the WB.

⁴⁸ Joyce Millman, “Hail and farewell: *Dawson’s Creek*, *Buffy*, and the soul of the WB,” *Portland Phoenix*, May 2–8, 2003, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.portlandphoenix.com/television/top_story/documents/02860363.asp.

⁴⁹ Joe Flint, “*Dawson’s Creek* is named the filthiest TV series,” *Entertainment Weekly*, August 6, 1998, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20471622_83644,00.html.

⁵⁰ “True Love,” *Dawson’s Creek*, the WB, May 24, 2000.

Significance

Popular culture has long played a significant role in recording present history for posterity. It is unnecessary to look much further than William Shakespeare's impact on modern culture and popular understanding of history to see evidence of this (Shakespeare's work, not coincidentally, was frequently referenced on *Dawson's Creek*).⁵¹ Popular media is the greatest available outlet to reach great numbers of people. Layperson interest in specific periods of history or works of literature, for example, fluctuates largely as a function of the films and television programs generated in Hollywood or through programs such as Oprah's Book Club. While the extent to which popular culture shapes our perception of history is debatable, in many cases, popular culture appears to believe this of itself.⁵²

In a 2006 Home Box Office (HBO) special, "Assume the Position with Mr. Wuhl," comedian-turned-writer-turned mock historian Robert Wuhl asserted the importance of popular culture in a lecture he delivered to a New York University history class. Citing numerous examples throughout American history, including Paul

⁵¹ Examples include "The All Nighter" (Season 2, Episode 7), in which Shakespeare is cited frequently, including a sequence where principal character says a line from *Macbeth*'s "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy, and "Two Gentlemen of Capeside" (Season 4, Episode 3), which, as the title indicates, includes several references to *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

⁵² This is not to say that popular culture presents an accurate view of history or that viewers even believe film or television to be accurate; rather, that popular culture has an impact on what historical topics gain national attention. For example, in one survey Americans rate television as one of the least trustworthy sources for historical information, but are simultaneously hesitant to "give a single numerical trustworthiness score to the whole category." Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1998), 99.

Revere, Christopher Columbus, Yankee Doodle, and the convergence of star power from war heroes and poets to media celebrities, Wuhl insists that “pop culture is history.”⁵³ If most modern historical understanding is based on popular culture (as it appears to be), then it can only be expected that this trend will continue. As Tucker Carlson of Microsoft National Broadcasting Company (MSNBC) explained in the Wuhl special, “History has a purpose. It’s not just a random series of events and facts, it tells a story and it’s used by every generation to tell stories they find useful.”⁵⁴

Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, youth culture has become a particularly vital aspect of popular culture not only because it anticipates future trends and influences cultural development, but also because youth marketing is the backbone of the contemporary entertainment industry and a focus in advertising. This point in the (albeit limited) history of youth culture is of particular interest for two primary reasons. First, drastic improvements in technology, coupled with a dramatic increase in its availability, greatly enhance cultural awareness and access. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, a shift in the presentation of popular culture may signify a larger historical shift. This change may be the result of a divide between the Millennial Generation and their parents and grandparents, Baby Boomers/Gen X and the “Greatest Generation,” respectively.

At the end of the twentieth century there was a significant gap between Millennials and other generations. The Greatest Generation, for example, is so-named

⁵³ Robert Wuhl, “Assume the Position with Mr. Wuhl,” HBO, April 1, 2006.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

because it refers to the generation of soldiers from the Second World War.⁵⁵ Baby Boomers and Gen X also lived through tumultuous periods of historical significance, including the Cold War, Civil Rights Movement, and Vietnam War.⁵⁶ In contrast, the Millennial Generation advanced into its late teens and early twenties without experiencing a great “cause” to champion or rights to defend.⁵⁷

Based on the media consumed by Millennials, it seems that this generation sought to define itself in relation to previous generations by relying on popular media to place the Millennial Generation along a historical timeline. Essentially, there were no immediate moral or political dilemmas to address, so knowledge of past events, significant milestones, and popular culture for older generations was rewarded instead.

However, with the events of September 11, 2001, an oft-discussed paradigm shift occurred and modern American youth were presented with their first

⁵⁵ The term *the greatest generation* was first coined by Tom Brokaw in his 1998 bestseller of the same name. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998). While it may not be an accurate representation of this group, it is the standard that was broadcast to Millennials in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

⁵⁶ Gen X is typically identified as those born roughly between 1965 and 1980. M.J. Stephy, “Gen-X: The Ignored Generation?,” *Time*, April 16, 2008, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1731528,00.html>. Boomers are usually identified as those born between roughly 1946 and 1964. Staff writer, “Oldest Baby Boomers Turn 60!,” U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, July 13, 2006, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.sec.gov/news/press/extra/seniors/aging boomers.htm>.

⁵⁷ Jeff Gordinier goes as far to say that this lack of purpose has refocused Millennial energy on “stuff.” He writes “The millennials... seem to speak with none of the doubt and skepticism that have marked—and hampered—Generation X. They just *love* stuff. They love celebrities. They love technology. They love name brands.” Jeff Gordinier, *X Saves the World: How Generation X Got the Shaft but Can Still Keep Everything from Sucking* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2008), xviii-xix.

internationally significant generation-defining moment. The War on Terror that followed presented young men and women with their first opportunity to participate in a campaign similar in concept (though not in scope or principle) to previous wars. As a result, young Americans once again had a “cause” and may have lost the need to place themselves contextually with previous generations through popular culture.

In an article exploring “Generation Y” published November 2001, Adam S. Kirby summarized, “After the deadliest attack on American soil in the history of the republic, the generation that previously seemed directionless and without a fitting title now had one—Generation 9/11.”⁵⁸ Kirby was one of many to use the term “Generation 9/11.”⁵⁹ As the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks approached, President Obama hailed the “9/11 Generation” in a speech to the American Legion to honor the Americans who served in the military since September

⁵⁸ Adam S. Kirby, “From ashes of tragedy comes Generation 9/11,” *The Marquette Tribune*, November 16, 2001 cited in Pat Somers, Ph.D., “In Search of Generation 9/11” (University of Texas at Austin, 2005).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Barbara Kantrowitz, “Generation 9-11: The Kids Who Grew Up With Peace and Prosperity Are Facing Their Defining Moment,” *Newsweek*, November 11, 2001, accessed December 6, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2001/11/11/generation-9-11.html> and Juliette Kayyem, “The ink generation: Tattooed by 9/11, millennials make marks of their own,” *The Boston Globe*, September 6, 2011, accessed December 6, 2011, http://articles.boston.com/2011-09-05/bostonglobe/30116247_1_tattoo-parlors-millennials-generation. Although the presence of the term “Generation 9/11” indicates the significance of the September 11 attacks to Millennials, it never came to replace “Millennial Generation.” I attribute this to two phenomena. First, it has never been common practice to name a generation after a tragic event (owing to the absence of a “Generation Pearl Harbor” or “Great Depression Generation”). Also, some writers use the term to refer to Americans who were in middle or elementary school at the time of the September 11 attacks, rather than those who were old enough to join the military.

11, 2001. The day after that speech, in a ceremony marking his retirement, General David Petraeus gave a nod to the role of Millennials in the War on Terror. Petraeus recalled a conversation he had with Tom Brokaw in 2003 in which Brokaw called the young people serving in Iraq “American’s new greatest generation.”⁶⁰

These sentiments were not restricted to politicians. Rather, they were based on emerging trends in government participation. Young people who may not have otherwise considered a career in the military enlisted in the armed forces, which noted an increase in recruits (ages 18–24) from high-income neighborhoods and with higher levels of education.⁶¹ In a study of Americans among the civilian population who were college-age when the September 11 attacks occurred, Pat Somers found an increase in need for community, global awareness, and civic engagement.⁶²

These effects were felt culturally as well. There is no longer a need for the WB, as evidenced by the end of “the WB-brand” programming (*Buffy*, *Dawson’s Creek*, and *Gilmore Girls*) and what has ultimately served as its replacement (*The OC*, *Glee*, and *Gossip Girl*).⁶³ Reviewing popular culture identifies many possible historical shifts, including a change in youth perception of its role in society and its

⁶⁰ David Rhode, “The Great Debate: The 9/11 generation,” *Reuters*, September 8, 2011, accessed December 6, 2011, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2011/09/08/the-911-generation/>.

⁶¹ Tim Kane, Ph.D., “The Demographics of Military Enlistment After 9/11,” The Heritage Foundation, Executive Memorandum No. 987, November 3, 2005.

⁶² Pat Somers, “In Search of Generation 9/11” (University of Texas at Austin, 2005).

⁶³ Jon Bonné and Gael Fashingbauer Cooper, “As two networks pair up, it’s time to get real,” *Msnbc.com*, January 25, 2006, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/11007437/ns/today-entertainment/t/two-networks-pair-its-time-get-real/>.

placement in history. In a *Time* retrospective published following the death of Osama bin Laden, one Millennial noted, “I blame [bin Laden] for, in addition to much larger crimes, bringing my childhood to its cataclysmic close. Yet I feel ambivalently, uncomfortably grateful for having experienced 9/11: I don't know who I'd be without it.”⁶⁴ These sentiments are echoed by other Millennials. In an informal nationwide study conducted by students at the American University School of Communication, 71% of respondents (ages 18–29 at the time of the study) indicated that the September 11 attacks “impacted different facets of their lives during the past decade.”⁶⁵ Shows like *Dawson's Creek* referenced past and current popular culture phenomenon and highlighted intellectualism in an effort to generate legitimation for the show, as well as its audience.⁶⁶ Youth-oriented programming during this period reflects a search for legitimation in an era where the viewers are seeking a better understanding of themselves in relation to their collective history. The events of September 11, 2001 provided legitimation for the Millennial Generation, and other generations began to take them more seriously, commenting, for example, that the Millennial Generation

⁶⁴ Abigail Deutsch, “Viewpoint: The Myth of the ‘9/11 Generation,’” *Time*, May 6, 2011, accessed December 3, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2070004_2070003_2070018,00.html.

⁶⁵ Katy Pitkin, “Survey: Millennials Affected By 9/11, don't fear another attack,” *Growing Up in the Shadow of 9/11*, April 29, 2011, accessed December 3, 2011, <http://www.growingup9-11.com/?p=109>.

⁶⁶ In *Dawson's Creek*, this is evidenced by the “advanced” dialogue and character self-reflexivity that did not exist in shows such as *Saved by the Bell* or *Beverly Hills, 90210*. As Jeffrey Stepakoff explains, “It is best described as a quintessential coming-of-age show, only there had never really been anything quite like it before.” (Stepakoff 2007, 235)

was “socially aware, well informed, and civically active, when formerly it had been an apathetic, self-indulgent Generation Y.”⁶⁷

The most successful youth-oriented shows during this time incorporated old archetypes (the classic coming-of-age saga) with a modern presentation (typically hyperarticulate characters), fueled by intense cultural awareness. Although the WB proved to be a failing venture, it made a lasting impact on the way in which youth television is presented and perceived. The changes observed in television signify a larger historical movement from irony to nostalgia to the current popular theme, reality.⁶⁸ I anticipate that through the study of this trend, particularly the moment when the WB was at its peak, it will be possible to better understand both the Millennial Generation and, now, “Generation Z” through a better understanding of what they are watching.

⁶⁷ Thomas Reissmann, “Four Years After the Attack, the Name Generation 9/11 Lives On, Now It Even Has Its Own Book by the Same Title,” PRWeb, August 13, 2005, accessed December 3, 2011, <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2005/08/prweb272189.htm>.

⁶⁸ My focus here is comparing trends in teen-targeted dramas, so I will not delve into reality programming in detail. However, it is worth noting that most reality programming contains escapist elements that mirror trends in hour-long dramas targeted to teenagers in that they typically focus on the extraordinarily wealthy or “real” people in extraordinary circumstances (being guided by a host who gained fame before being featured on a reality show). Examples include *America’s Next Top Model* (2003–), *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (2004–2006), and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2007–).

Methodology

Most commentary on *Dawson's Creek* is restricted to the period during the show's original run, presumably due to the tumultuous nature of the television drama, based on factors such as ratings and actor availability. This approach distinctly limits the scope of any review, as it prohibits interpreting the completed series as a unified text.

I believe it is necessary to view *Dawson's Creek* as a complete text because the show's creator conceived the program as a quasi-autobiographical account of his early years growing up in a rural, coastal town. Although Kevin Williamson left the show following Season Two, he returned to write the Series Finale and complete the narrative he originally laid out for the program. In light of the show's conclusion and subsequent absence from the prime time airwaves (as well as its repackaging in DVD and rebroadcast formats) an overall theme emerges that warrants review.⁶⁹

Retrospective analysis will show how *Dawson's Creek* mirrored changes in American culture, reflected Millennials' changing legitimization anxiety, and pioneered marketing strategies to increase viewer participation, as well as network revenue. I will reflect on the program as whole, in addition to placing focus on individual

⁶⁹ Some variations in presentation between first-run, DVD, and rebroadcast format exist, which may affect the interpretation of a particular episode's meaning. For example, the first season's episode titles were changed for DVD and syndication and several songs were replaced ostensibly because producers were unable to obtain distribution rights. This study focuses strictly on plotlines, their presentation, meanings, and relevance to the viewer and what is reflected back the viewer. I limited my study to the "author's" intent, when known. As a result, these changes and interpretations of their meaning will not be discussed in depth.

storylines and episodes, which exist as complete units that combine to create an overall narrative.⁷⁰

Unlike teen programming that preceded it, *Dawson's* perception as quality television is a vital part of its narrative. As such, it is also category that requires critical scrutiny. Quality television is typically defined as "a reflection of the values of the narrow elite which controls it and which has always thought that its tastes are synonymous as quality."⁷¹ The marker of "quality" is crucial in the entertainment industry, as well as for critics and, particularly in the case of Millennials at the end of the 20th century, audiences. Although early criticism argued for *Dawson's Creek* as an example of quality television, this definition of quality accounts for the reception of *Dawson's Creek* by the mainstream media as less-than-quality television. As this meaning hints, the perception of television as quality is deeply-rooted in the awards circuit and/or critical acclaim, which often excludes teen-oriented programming. Given the prevalence of this idea of quality, and subsequent separation of teen programming from the concept of quality, attempts by the show to place itself (and, by extension, its audience) as "quality" are unlikely to be successful.

⁷⁰ I will, largely, exclude the last half of the second seasons and first few episodes of the third season from this review. Staffing changes at the show during the second and third seasons resulted in storylines that, by all indication, are not indicative of the initial intent of the show. This was most clearly expressed by WB executive Jordan Levin before Season Three aired when he told *Entertainment Weekly*, "It will definitely return to a first-season sensibility... Dawson will have something to say, instead of the cast reacting to bigger-than-life plots." (Stepakoff 2007, 243)

⁷¹ Rupert Murdoch, "MacTaggart Lecture" (presented at Edinburgh International Television Festival 5, Edinburgh, August 25, 1989) cited in Russ Taylor, "Measuring Quality Television," *Federal Communications Law Journal* 55.3 (April 9, 2003): 596.

However, whether or not *Dawson's Creek* is ultimately perceived as quality television, its format indicates that its creators actively attempted to create quality and reach a larger audience. According to Matt Hills, *Dawson's* bid for "quality television" can be found in its "media-pervaded, post-modern self-reflexivity and therapy-saturated character reflexivity... combined through the unifying 'author-function' of Kevin Williamson."⁷² This active desire to cross genre and audience and to emerge as one of few teen-oriented television programs in history to be viewed as a serious work of authorship is a serious bid for quality that warrants the need to explore the cultural context in which the show is placed, the program itself, and its audience. An argument can also be made for the perception of *Dawson's Creek* as quality television based on the series' ability to reinvigorate the teenage market and serve as a model for nearly all subsequent teenage programming, which also attests to its need for critical review.⁷³

⁷² Matt Hills, "'*Dawson's Creek*: 'Quality Teen TV' and 'Mainstream Cult''," in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 59.

⁷³ While much of the teen-oriented programming that has emerged since *Dawson's Creek* reflects shifting cultural values, many of the marketing formulas it pioneered persist. *The OC*, for example, released six soundtracks during its four season run. It also featured "music heard on tonight's episode," which was first introduced on *Dawson's Creek*. Shortly after John Hughes' death in 2009, *One Tree Hill* aired a tribute episode in which the characters were placed in situations pulled directly from John Hughes films ("Don't You Forget About Me" [Season 7, Episode 15]). Williamson frequently put his characters in situations inspired by Hughes films. Two examples include "The Breakfast Club" (Season 1, Episode 7), which takes place over the course of a Saturday detention, and "Crossroads," where everyone forgets Pacey's 16th birthday (Season 2, Episode 2). In both cases, the characters specifically discuss the movies they are referencing, in this case *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles*, respectively.

Nostalgia and 1990s Popular Culture

Despite the number of scientific and technologic advances that occurred in the 1990s (among them, the introduction of the Human Genome Project, first mammalian clone, and launch of the World Wide Web) popular culture seemed content to focus on the past. The Disney Renaissance took hold in the late 1980s through the mid 1990s, reinvigorating traditional fairy tales with the commercial and critical success of such films as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*.⁷⁴ By the late 1990s, music (and film) experienced the revival of swing. Bands such as Big Bag Voodoo Daddy, the Brian Setzer Orchestra, and the Cherry Poppin' Daddies appeared in films (such as *Swingers*), in advertisements for The Gap, the Superbowl half-time show, and were featured prominently on MTV. Perhaps most notably, James Cameron's old-fashioned romantic melodrama *Titanic* was released in December 1997, generating more than \$600 million at the box office by the time it closed ten months later.⁷⁵

As Susanne Daniels, former president of entertainment the WB, explains, "[With the success of *Titanic*,] the boom in affluent, educated teens and twentysomethings was 'discovered' by the pop culture and lifestyle press."⁷⁶ While

⁷⁴ The Disney Renaissance is so named because the Walt Disney Animated Studios returned to the style of filmmaking that made Walt Disney famous, following a decade of personnel changes in the 1980s. Claudia Puig, "Waking Sleeping Beauty' documentary takes animated look at Disney renaissance," *USA Today*, March 26, 2010, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2010-03-26-beauty26_ST_N.htm.

⁷⁵ Daniels and Littleton 2007, 171.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

the revelation of the spending power of this new demographic positioned *Dawson's Creek* for commercial success, it also demonstrated that *Dawson's* was, in some ways, not at all unique for the period. "Retro" was on the rise, and that is exactly how Jeffrey Stepakoff describes the process of creating a storyline for an episode of *Dawson's Creek*. He reveals:

At one point, someone... was concerned that the story was no longer simply being *inspired* by the movie but that it was sounding exactly like *Risky Business*... someone... suggested making Dawson *aware* that it was just like the movie. "That's right," I confidentially shouted. "We'll claim it!"

To claim something in a script means to have a character consciously reference the material you are stealing. That way you looked smart and cool because you *meant* to do it, instead of looking like you were incapable of developing your own original story.⁷⁷

Stepakoff was speaking of his experiences at the beginning of Season Three. This was his first year as a writer on the show, however, and by this time, "claiming it" was a hallmark of *Dawson's Creek*. For example, the title of every episode in Season One had some sort cultural reference that pre-dated most of the Millennial Generation ("Dirty Dancing" [Season 1, Episode 3], "The Breakfast Club" [Season 1, Episode 7], "Modern Romance" [Season 1, Episode 10], and "Breaking Away" [Season 1, Episode 13]).⁷⁸ Not only did the titles mimic films and music, predominately of the 1980s, but many of the story lines echoed the inspiration of the episode titles almost exactly. Most notably, Episode 7 "The Breakfast Club," found the four main

⁷⁷ Stepakoff 2007, 238.

⁷⁸ The titles of these episodes (all of which originally aired between January and May 1998) were changed for the DVD releases, presumably because of licensing fees.

characters in Saturday detention, locked in the library by a hapless school administrator. At one point, writer Williamson's dialogue makes the connection not only to the John Hughes film from 1985, but also to the early film career of one of his lead actors.

Dawson: This is so Breakfast Club!

Jen: Breakfast Club?

Dawson: You know John Hughes movie where the five kids are stuck in detention all day?

Joey: Yeah, in the beginning they hate each other and then by the end they're best friends.

Jen: Oh yeah. God that movie stunk! Whatever happened to those actors?

Dawson: Well, Anthony Michael Hall developed some weird thyroid condition, Molly Ringwald lost her gawky ingénue appeal and the rest and languishing somewhere in TV hell.

Pacey: No way man! Emilio Estevez was in those duck movies. Those were classic. So funny!

[Jen, Dawson, and Joey stare at him blankly]

In this example, not only is Williamson drawing attention to a Gen X staple, but pulling it into a Millennial Generation context. Pacey's "duck movies" line refers to *The Mighty Ducks* trilogy, in which the actor playing Pacey, Joshua Jackson, starred alongside Emilio Estevez.⁷⁹ Although Williamson frequently introduced his other projects and the work of his cast within the context of the show, he most commonly referenced "classic" films and literature.⁸⁰ If *Dawson's* critics are to be

⁷⁹ The films were released by Walt Disney Pictures between 1992 and 1996. At the time the first movie premiered, Joshua Jackson was 14, roughly the age of the target audience, who were now the same viewers who constituted *Dawson's* target audience.

⁸⁰ A relative term, I use "classic" here to refer to films from the 1930s–1980s by critically and/or culturally acclaimed directors, such as Hitchcock and Spielberg, and canonized literature.

believed, more often than not these references were lost on the average viewer.⁸¹ For example, “The Reluctant Hero” (Season 2 Episode 8) opened, as many episodes did, with Dawson and one of his friends watching a movie. In this case it was *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a film released in 1939. As the title suggests, two of the storylines result in one of the main characters acting as “hero” to someone else on the show. While it is unlikely that everyone in *Dawson’s* target audience was familiar with this movie, Williamson was rewarding viewers who understand the reference and generating a connection between (filmic) history and modern situations for those who do not.

Although Williamson’s style embraced the significance of film in modern life, as the show progressed, psychology and literature also came to play an important role.⁸² As a vehicle for films, television, music, and literature the target audience may otherwise be unfamiliar with *Dawson’s Creek* is serving two purposes; it is educating its audience and generating opportunities for dialogues between Millennials and other generations.

⁸¹ Dan Odenwald, “Up the Creek: Dawson’s Creek Finale,” *Metro Weekly*, May 8, 2003, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.metroweekly.com/arts_entertainment/tv/?ak=469.

⁸² For instance, “Barefoot at Capefest” (Season 3, Episode 9) has two characters participating in the school’s production of *Barefoot in the Park*. “The Two Gentlemen of Capeside” (Season 4 Episode 3) shows the students in class discussing the modern relevance, particularly to the current storyline, of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. One of the final episodes of the series, “Catch-22” (Season 6, Episode 20), draws attention, even going as far as focusing on highlighted passages displayed on screen, to the modern significance of *Catch-22*.

First, it is in essence “tutoring” its viewers. While the majority of the audience may not be interested in renting a Frank Capra movie or taking any further interest in their own English assignments, it is offering the chance to engage those viewers who are interested and either familiar with the cultural “language” of the show, or eager to learn more. Essentially, *Dawson’s Creek* is offering a “choose your own adventure” similar to the children’s book of the same name. Those viewers who only wish to focus on the relationships in the show won’t be lost by the occasionally obscure references as they are largely made only to serve as a vehicle to the plot, explained in the context of the show. By the same token any viewer who was interested could use the show as a catalyst to develop an interest in another aspect of culture or piece of history.

This formula also serves as a way to engage cross-cultural conversation. *Dawson’s Creek* was unique compared to most of its predecessors and many of its contemporaries in that it was one of the few (if not the only of the) teen-oriented dramas to offer adults a place at the table. That is, the relationships of the parents, though not paramount, were granted screen time in the same way as their children. The parents were central to the stories and central to the characters’ lives; for example, if parents were fighting, it affected the children, and the children frequently sought their parents’ approval. Barbara Kantrowitz, *Newsweek* contributing editor, addressed the connection between Baby Boomers and their children, the Millennials, in an article titled *The Fine Art of Letting Go*. Her expert source Barbara Hofer, an associate professor of psychology at Middlebury College, explained, “Their

connection to their parents is deep and strong... They say, 'My parents are my best friends.' People would have seen that as aberrant a generation ago, as pathological.”⁸³

In a 2006 survey of Middlebury freshman, Hofer found that the average freshman reported 10.41 communications per week with their parents and most said they were satisfied with the amount or wanted more.⁸⁴ As Hofer indicates, this phenomenon is in stark contrast to the counter culture and anti-establishment assertions of Generation X, which actively sought to distinguish youth culture from that of their parents.⁸⁵

Through these cross-generational references, the show reflected and emphasized the importance of open dialogue across generations (from The Greatest Generation to, in later seasons, Generation Z, or later Millennials). *Dawson's Creek* also uses these ideas to reinforce the concept that the most successful relationships (between parents and children, grandparents and children, friends, or lovers) are based on honesty, respect, and a willingness to communicate using a modern and historical dialogue.

Dawson's Creek and the Language of Maturity

Like much of the WB's early programming, *Dawson's Creek* had been rejected by another network. As with many other shows that ultimately aired on the

⁸³ Barbara Kantrowitz and Peg Tyre, "The Fine Art of Letting Go," *Newsweek*, May 22, 2006, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/parents/images/TheFineArtofLettingGo.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ One notable popular culture example of this is *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), which followed a teenager as he deceived his parents and evaded school administrators to skip class.

WB in its early years, that network was FOX. However, FOX passed on *Dawson's* for much different reasons than it turned down other programs which found a slot on the WB. *Dawson's Creek* writer, Jeffrey Stepakoff explains, "A FOX executive said the script seemed odd, old-fashioned. He felt that Kevin [Williamson]'s dialogue was stilted and archaic."⁸⁶ FOX had experienced a great deal of success with teen-oriented programs like *Beverly Hills, 90210*. However, most accounts of viewership at the time indicate that FOX was seeking an older audience. For example, Susanne Daniels, head of the WB's program development at the time of its launch, recalls, "we were aiming for teens and young adults ages 12 to 24, the audience that other networks seemed to be ignoring, even FOX."⁸⁷ Even if FOX was actively pursuing the teen viewer, the reasons given for rejecting the show seem to have more to do with content than with the target demographic. In this case, the executive believed that the show was too mature for its intended audience.⁸⁸

Ultimately, many critics agreed with him. A reviewer for *Entertainment Weekly* gave *Dawson's* a "C" the month it premiered stating, "[The show's dialogue] is a big red warning flag that something is amiss. All the knowing pop-culture self-

⁸⁶ Stepakoff 2007, 175.

⁸⁷ Daniels and Littleton 2007, 53; Valerie Wee echoes this sentiment in her essay "Teen Television and the WB Television Network," in which she notes that FOX had steadily been "aging up" since the early 1990s. (Wee 2008, 47)

⁸⁸ The word maturity, in relation to television in particular, can be loaded. Here, I mean emotional or intellectually maturity, rather than the "mature audience" label that appears on film or television programming. While *Dawson's* faced criticism based on its characters' frank discussions of sexuality (The Parent's Television Council [<http://www.parentstv.org>] rated it the worst show on television for the 1997–1998 and 1998–1999 season, and fourth worst show in 2000–2001), that aspect of the show is not something I will expand on at this point.

consciousness that has made Williamson's horror flicks so refreshing too often proves a didactic drag here.”⁸⁹ This sentiment permeated criticism throughout the show's run. The month the Series Finale aired, a writer for *Metro Weekly* interviewed Robert Thompson, a professor of popular television at Syracuse University about his reaction to the program. Although Thompson had an overall positive view of the show, he ultimately concluded that it “was laughably unrealistic and self-conscious... If teens were really that articulate, they wouldn't need psychiatrists—they would be them.”⁹⁰

While critics dismissed the hyper-articulate dialogue as unrealistic, fans and cultural studies scholars emphasized that this language expressed emotions that the average viewer of *Dawson's* target demographic likely felt, but could not articulate. Executive producer, Paul Stupin, defended the show's dialogue by identifying it as a methodology to engage viewers, “Our characters feel the same things we all do, they are just better at expressing them.”⁹¹ Kevin Williamson takes this idea a step further by explaining:

I think that our target audience today is just so savvy, so I try to write all of my characters so that they are self-aware. They've all lived through the psycho-babble of the eighties... Even if their behavior is not that of an adult, they can sure talk like one.⁹²

⁸⁹ Ken Tucker, “TV Review: *Dawson's Creek*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, January 23, 1998, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,281634,00.html>. The show ultimately won favor with the magazine as it gained an audience, with its cast appearing on its annual “Fall Preview” issue for the 1998–1999 season.

⁹⁰ Odenwald 2003.

⁹¹ Darren Crosdale, *Dawson's Creek: The All New Official Companion* (Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel, 2001), 123.

⁹² Hills 2004, 60.

Here, Williamson most clearly expresses what I believe is the basis for criticism of the self-reflexivity and articulate teens in *Dawson's Creek*.

Any criticism of intellectualism associated with a teen-oriented drama stems from critics' unwillingness by critics to accept such programs as quality television. Because the teen genre was marginalized until the early 1990s, it has been difficult for many critics, in both the press and academia, to view teen programming as a medium worthy of further consideration. In a (very brief) overview of teen programming from the inception of television through the early 1990s, Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein introduce the most common patterns that emerge when reviewing early teen-oriented television. These patterns include an equal focus on other demographics (such as parents or siblings), placement within a domestic framework (for example, *The Patty Duke Show* and *Gidget*), and non-fiction series (like *American Bandstand*). They go on to report, "U.S. culture commonly conceptualizes teen TV as a serialized melodrama or dramedy."⁹³

One scholar, however, has identified *Dawson's Creek* and the WB's role in the evolution of quality television. Valerie Wee explains:

In a variety of ways, the WB texts represented the next step in the evolution of quality series' characteristics... the WB shows indulged in a degree of postmodern intertextuality, pastiche, genre hybridity, media mixing, and hyperconscious self-reflexivity, excessive enough to constitute a categorical distinction.⁹⁴

⁹³ Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein, "Introduction: Watching Teen TV" in *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom*, eds. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 13.

⁹⁴ Wee 2008, 52.

Here, Wee identifies *Dawson's Creek* as a marker in the history of quality television. For scholars and fans who agree with this interpretation, the hyper-articulacy employed by Williamson and other staff writers becomes a mechanism for developing a tone for the show and, in effect, advancing the teen drama as a genre.

Additionally, criticism of *Dawson's Creek* as overly intellectual did not emphasize a heightened academic vocabulary (i.e., a liberal use of "SAT words"), as it did an enhanced emotional vocabulary. The realism that suffered when 16-year-old characters consistently expressed complex feelings lucidly, was not based on language but the complexity of the emotions themselves. *Dawson's Creek* is representative of a number late 1990s programs that presented young characters who were emotionally aware.⁹⁵ In these series, unlike earlier teen-oriented programming, parents no longer served as authorities to explain complex emotions that young adults were not expected to process, much less articulate. As Joey points out early in the series, "Let me tell you about Dawson. Granted he's articulate for his age, but he's not exactly mature."⁹⁶ Essentially, Williamson's dialogue highlighted the emotions of his characters. That is, it is precisely in their ability to speak so openly about feelings and admit to emotions that are difficult to process (grief at the loss of a grandparent, confusion over a divorce, etc.) the impact of these issues on a young person become so clear.

⁹⁵ Other examples include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Felicity* (1998–2002), and *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007).

⁹⁶ "Carnal Knowledge," *Dawson's Creek*, the WB, February 10, 1998.

However, as Joey indicates, “mature” language, may make the main characters appear more adult, that is not actually the case. Likewise, parental figures and other adults in *Dawson’s* are, in many ways, no more mature than their adolescent children. For example, in the first season, one of the driving storylines is the dissolution of Dawson’s parents’ marriage because his mother has an affair with a coworker. At one point, Dawson’s father asks him if anyone has called that he should be aware of. Dawson responds that no one has called for him, but his father presses him further, making it clear (without overtly stating it) that he is interested in knowing about calls that his wife may have received. Although Dawson’s father frequently provides advice and support to his son, in this case, Dawson acts more as a friend, if not a parent. Not only is this character, at this point a sophomore in high school, expected to understand his father’s allusions to his mother’s infidelity, he is also looked to for emotional support.

When coupled with the concept of nostalgia that saturates *Dawson’s Creek*, the contrast between emotional and intellectual maturity take on an additional meaning. The main characters, like their parents (and the viewers), are expected to have at least some familiarity with popular culture references spanning the 1930s to the present. From the beginning, *Dawson’s* made it clear that popular culture played a significant role in the emotional and intellectual development of its characters. In the most obvious example of this, Dawson says in the pilot, “All the mysteries of the universe, all the answers to life’s questions can be found in a Spielberg film.” Yet despite the wealth of knowledge that can be obtained from film, music, and

television, popular culture does not provide all the tools necessary to deal with relationships or their complexities. Otherwise, not only would teens but parents as well be better equipped at handling these situations.

The significance of this point becomes clear in the Series Finale. In this episode the love triangle that has dominated the second half of the series comes to a head. At one point, Joey makes a reference to a 1950s movie that Pacey does not understand.⁹⁷ By missing this passing comment, the show emphasizes that it is life, not fiction, which ultimately serves as a reference point and tool for personal development. The fact that Dawson (the other member of the love triangle) would have immediately understood the reference only serves to reinforce the value in this exchange.

From decisions made by parents in Season One to the resolution of the series' focal love triangle in the finale, the series continually tested archetypes of maturity. The show downplayed traditional markers of maturity, such as age, in favor of more intangible qualities possessed by those most willing to acknowledge their limitations. By featuring verbally mature, self-conscious characters, *Dawson's* asserted that maturity and age are not always synonymous. Simultaneously, mature dialogue allowed the writers to convey universal emotions more articulately, which may have ultimately led to the show's success during that period.

“As Heard On...”: Music as a Bridge in *Dawson's Creek*

⁹⁷ “...Must Come to an End,” *Dawson's Creek*, the WB, May 14, 2003.

While the dialogue on *Dawson's Creek* is one of the most obvious defining features of teen programming in the late 1990s, the use of music is no less significant. Music featured on *Dawson's Creek* frequently served as a bridge connecting multiple components of the show and cultivating the relationship of the show to its audience—by linking, for instance, characters' actions to their emotions, the audience to Warner Brothers' owned music, and the audience to the characters. In "Rocking Prime Time: Gender, the WB, and Teen Culture," Ben Aslinger argues, "many of the songs on WB programs function to communicate character interiority, saying what the characters can't say, and often saying what the characters don't know or haven't realized yet."⁹⁸ As with many other elements that ultimately served the show creatively, the use of music in innovative ways on *Dawson's Creek* began as a business venture. T. L.

Stanley explains:

The WB plans to pump up the volume for its new TV series *Dawson's Creek* by using cutting-edge music and offering artists a 15-second promo at the end of the show in exchange for a break on licensing fees... The tags will show the bands' album cover and play a five second music snippet; two or three will air per show. Garth Ancier, the network's entertainment president, said the intent is to infuse the show with hip popular music without breaking the bank. Though a number of TV shows are music-driven, no network has offered to promote artists in such a way.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ben Aslinger, "Rocking Prime Time: Gender, the WB, and Teen Culture" in *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom*, eds. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2008), 79.

⁹⁹ T. L. Stanley, "Music Promos Will Flag WB's *Dawson's Creek*," *Brandweek*, January, 19, 1998, cited in Lori Bindig, *Dawson's Creek: A Critical Understanding* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2008), 130.

The WB successfully used this device, and the incorporation of music generally (frequently lesser-known artists who had reduced licensing fees), to “introduce teen audiences to new music and to consolidate its image as a network for young, cutting-edge viewers.”¹⁰⁰ This strategy ultimately proved effective, as indicated by its adoption on other networks. Aslinger explains, “Fox’s adoption of the same practice for its teen-skewed dramas such as *The O.C.* demonstrates the business savvy of the WB decision and its broader effect on teen television.”¹⁰¹

Beyond its marketing value, the music on *Dawson’s Creek* serves as a bridge in a number of ways. The aforementioned function of communicating emotions is the most obvious of these. Kay Dickinson notes that *Dawson’s* avoided cynical music typically geared toward teens “in order to invest [itself] in a very distinct, earnest and regulated representation of adolescence through music.”¹⁰² The script and music complement each other, frequently in a very direct way.¹⁰³ For example, the predominant storyline in Season One was Joey’s developing romantic feelings for her best friend, Dawson. In the finale, Dawson realized that he reciprocated and wanted to pursue a relationship. As he searched the town to share this revelation with Joey, Melodie Crittenden’s rendition of “Broken Road” played over the action until

¹⁰⁰ Aslinger 2008, 83.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 81; This method continues on all programming on the CW, as well as ABC’s *Grey’s Anatomy* (the latter is a program likely to attract the same audience that was in *Dawson’s Creek* target audience during its original run).

¹⁰² Kay Dickinson, “‘My Generation’: Popular Music, Age and Influence in Teen Drama of the 1990s,” in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption and Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 101.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 103.

Dawson found Joey waiting in his room.¹⁰⁴ (“Broken Road” is a slow-paced, piano-driven country song about failed relationships that result in finding love with a friend who was always in your life. Lyrics include, “I couldn’t see how every sign pointed straight to you/Every long lost dream lead me to where you are.”) As Aslinger notes, “music became a part of the lives of the characters; shifts in musical tastes, listening, and concert attendance became [another] way to map the characters’ emotional growth.”¹⁰⁵

Beside extension of character emotion and development, music connected the viewer to the show. In addition to the songs called out specifically at the end of each episode, fans could locate music on the show’s website, either because they liked it or, as Kay Dickinson argues, as the result of an “affiliation with the show, one which encourages its audience to follow up on all its leads.”¹⁰⁶ Although music is not referenced with the same frequency as film in the show, the characters’ cultural awareness creates the sense that the characters are as aware of the soundtrack as the viewer (an idea that is reinforced as the show progresses and becomes increasingly more self-aware). As the vast majority of music presented on the show is contemporary, even if the song itself is not familiar to the viewer, the musician or “sound” could be, and often would be.¹⁰⁷ Here, music serves to connect the characters and their emotional experiences.

¹⁰⁴ “Breaking Away,” Dawson’s Creek, the WB, May 19, 1998.

¹⁰⁵ Aslinger 2008, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Dickinson 2004, 103.

¹⁰⁷ *Dawson’s Creek* typically featured folk and indie artists, particularly on its

Music bridges popular culture and intellectualism, often by reinforcing cross-generational conversation. The music's direct expressions of emotion often clarify the sometimes esoteric dialogue. Even if, as some critics have suggested, a viewer finds a reference or phrase unclear or alienating, by reinforcing the overriding theme of a scene with music, the show is able to connect, on some level, with its entire audience. Cross-generational connections are reinforced by song selection, which included artists such as Bruce Springsteen and Joni Mitchell. While Kay Dickinson dismisses the use of Boomer-era music as "an adult culture interfering in an opportunity for youth to develop in a manner distinct from its parents," I would argue that the use of music from the 1960s through the 1990s serves the much more interesting purpose of enhancing the show's effort to initiate cross-generational conversation.¹⁰⁸

Most of the music played on *Dawson's Creek* was contemporary, even if the artists were more frequently associated with Boomer-era sensibilities. For example, the Joni Mitchell song heard on the show was from an album released in 2000, a month after the episode it appeared on aired. Another song traditionally associated with 1960s popular culture, "Daydream Believer," appeared on multiple episodes.¹⁰⁹ However, it was integrated into the narrative as a karaoke duet featuring Dawson and Joey and subsequent background cues were not the original version, but instead a cover recorded by contemporary artist Mary Beth Maziarz, whose music had

soundtrack, thus creating a "sound" associated with the show itself, one that would typically be associated with the white teenage audience. (Dickinson 2004, 105)

¹⁰⁸ Dickinson 2004, 107.

¹⁰⁹ "Stolen Kisses" (Season 3, Episode 19), "Coda" (Season 4, Episode 23), and "The Bostonians" (Season 5, Episode 1)

previously been heard on *Dawson's Creek*. By incorporating music likely more familiar to the average viewer's parent than the target audience in these unique ways, the program sought to engage a new audience for these songs while using music as a bridge between generations.¹¹⁰ Blending Boomer music with Millennial artists also further reinforces the program's idea that many of the fundamental emotions and concerns facing most of the teenagers have changed little across generations, which, at minimum, may serve as the basis for cross-generational engagement.

The WB and the Postmodern

In their book, *Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell explain the results of a twenty-four year study that ended in 2006. In this study, college students from thirty-one campuses in twenty-one states were asked to complete the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (asking participants to respond to statements such as "I think I am special person" and "I like to be the center of attention"). The results revealed a thirty percent increase in

¹¹⁰ The episode on which "Daydream Believer" first aired premiered on April 26, 2000, at the height of Napster's popularity and a year before iTunes was unveiled. As a result, data on whether or not the show had an impact on the single's sales is unavailable. However, based on the success original versions of songs such as "Don't Stop Believin'" have had after being featured on *Glee* (2009–), it is not unlikely that viewers of *Dawson's Creek* would take interest in the original version of the song after hearing it on that program. Reed Tucker, "Believin' one song's Journey: Story of the hit that won't die," *New York Post*, May 24, 2010, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.nypost.com/p/entertainment/music/believin_one_WITv6f7blCuLDjDbH52HIO.

narcissism between 1982 and 2006. They concluded, “The Boomers, a generation famous for being self-absorbed, were outdone by their children.”¹¹¹

This is one of the more compelling arguments for the Millennials as the leading postmodern generation. When Jean-Francois Lyotard first introduced the term “postmodernism” in the context of philosophical discussion, he defined it, at its most essential, as the distaste for metanarratives in favor of micronarratives.¹¹² While Twenge and Campbell may argue that this heightened sense of self contributes to a more narcissistic society, it also creates a culture of micronarratives.

The formative years of the Millennials, who graduated from high school roughly between 1995 and 2006, coincided with the rise of a “post-network, post-broadcast era.”¹¹³ As the managing general partner of the WB during the three years of development prior to its 1995 launch, Jamie Kellner had to determine how to compete successfully with the major broadcast networks. Ultimately, Kellner determined that the only way to create a successful new network was to follow “cable-inspired strategies of niche marketing and narrowcasting” over traditional network marketing strategies of appealing to a range of audiences.¹¹⁴ The rise of the teenage demographic in the mid-1990s, “the largest market to come along since their baby-boomer parents,” provided a target audience on which to focus.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 30.

¹¹² Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998), 24.

¹¹³ Wee 2008, 45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

So the process became cyclical, the network narrowcasting, and the audience embracing targeted programming and using it to create its own micronarratives, both sanctioned and personal, which reinforced niche marketing. While narrowcasting began as a marketing concept, it only obtained the level of success it did for the WB—doubling advertising revenues in a single season and increasing its audience share 25% at a time when every other broadcast network experienced a decline in viewership—as a result of the Millennials’ postmodern sensibility.¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Stepakoff explains how this theory worked in practice, “dawsonscreek.com [was] where fans could not only chat about the show, but tell us what they wanted to see next. The wishes of viewers had a very strong impact on the direction of the series. In fact, staff members were hired to interact regularly with fans online.”¹¹⁷

In the case of *Dawson’s Creek*, the target audience not only sought out programming that reflected its own (micro)narrative, but also looked to reinforce this narrative through active engagement with the material.¹¹⁸ Many viewers went as far as creating “fan fiction,” products that are generally associated with cult programming, such as *Star Trek*. As of July 2010, there were more than 1,000

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 56; It is worth mentioning that these increases occurred during the 1997–1998 television season, the season in which *Dawson’s Creek* debuted as a midseason replacement.

¹¹⁷ Stepakoff 2007, 246.

¹¹⁸ This is in contrast to network programming of the late 1980s and early 1990s (before marketers identified Millennials as a worthwhile audience) that sought to reach a much wider audience. The most notable example is ABC’s *TGIF* lineup, which included shows like *Full House*, *Step by Step*, and *Family Matters*. Although they featured teen characters prominently, equal time was dedicated to younger siblings and parents, in-line with network ideals of reaching the broadest demographics.

Dawson's Creek-inspired fan fiction stories on one fan fiction site alone (FanFiction.net).¹¹⁹

Fan fiction, among other fan-based engagement with the program, exemplifies another postmodern concept, Roland Barthes' "death of the author."¹²⁰ Not only are viewers constructing their own meaning without regard for the writer's (or producer's) intent, but they are creating additional (or alternate) narratives, essentially becoming authors themselves. This also further enhances the viewer's relationship with the show, by which the audience has an impact on the direction storylines take, while the program serves to "tutor" the viewer, allowing the absorption of information he or she considers relevant and discarding what is not useful. Active viewer participation is encouraged and show-sponsored resources actually foster divergent interpretations of the show's messaging. This is not to say that the series cannot be viewed as "authored." In fact, many reviews of *Dawson's*, particularly the first season, frequently focus on Kevin Williamson's role as author. Although the show lends itself to authorship-based discussions, it does not mandate the presence of Williamson as author on the viewer. Rather, Williamson creates hyper-articulate characters who freely express many of the emotions he grappled with in his youth. As

¹¹⁹ Jason Boog, Joshua Jackson Celebrates *Dawson's Creek* Fan Fiction, Galley Cat, July 29, 2010, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.mediabistro.com/galleycat/joshua-jackson-celebrates-dawsons-creek-fan-fiction_b12281.

¹²⁰ Barthes 1978.

a result, rather than force his role as author, he encourages “the teenager as self-analyst needing to articulate his/her desires and self-identity.”¹²¹

In his essay, “*Dawson’s Creek*: ‘Quality TV’ and ‘Mainstream Cult’?,” Matt Hills aptly identifies one of the areas where this is most apparent: the online dialogue among fans surrounding the love triangle that serves as the driving storyline for most of the show. He refers to “its textual extensions on the web and (online) fan culture of P/Jers or D/Jers.”¹²² It is worth mention that the terms “P/Jers” (fans of the Pacey/Joey relationship) and “D/Jers” (fans of the Dawson/Joey pairing) are not introduced by Hills; rather, they are terms created by fans who interacted on the WB’s official discussion forum, <http://www.talk.thewb.com>.¹²³

“Joey Potter and the Capeside Redemption”

Dawson’s Creek was the type of program that used the episode title, whether or not the audience was aware of it, to define the purpose of the episode in the context of the series. The last regular episode before the two hour Series Finale was no exception. In essence, the second-to-last episode was a season finale, drafted by the sixth season writing staff. It resolved all plotlines from the previous season and offered a summary for many of the themes that emerged throughout the show. The Series Finale, which was penned by Kevin Williamson, became an opportunity wrap-

¹²¹ Hills 2004, 58.

¹²² Ibid, 65.

¹²³ Ibid, 66; This site is no longer active; presumably it was closed when the WB went off the air.

up any messages the series creator laid out when penning the pilot episode seven years prior. In order to understand the goals of the series as completely as possible, a brief review of each of these episodes is necessary.

As the title indicates, the last regular episode focuses on two things: the character Joey and the idea of redemption, which is sought, in some way, by each of the characters. Dawson, who had planned to direct an autobiographical film, has given up his dream because he lost his life savings having invested in a business venture through a company where Pacey worked. Pacey also lost all of his money in this investment, as well as his job. Jen and Jack decide to transfer colleges to be with Jen's ailing grandmother while she seeks treatment for cancer. In this episode, Joey acts as a catalyst to ensure that Dawson's movie is made. She recruits actors and contacts some of Dawson's acquaintances from the previous season when Dawson was attending film school at USC. Pacey attempts to repair the divide between himself and Dawson by finding sponsors for the movie. Ultimately, the episode ends with Dawson's movie completing filming, Pacey and Dawson beginning to repair a long-damaged friendship, Jack, Jen, and her grandmother leaving for New York, and Joey realizing her dream of going to Paris after initiation the reunion of her friends and helping them realize their potential.

This episode is significant for many reasons. Most notably, it included reshoots of several scenes from the pilot episode with younger actors playing the principals. Rather than referencing contemporary film or movies from the previous generations, *Dawson's Creek* now referenced itself. This not only rewarded viewers

who have watched since the first season, but actively asserts the show as part of a cultural dialogue.

This reshooting also allowed the writers to respond to the show's audience and critics. Just as the writers, directors, and producers are acutely aware of the flaws in popular culture, they are no less aware of itself and the way it is perceived. This is most clearly demonstrated through the younger audience's response, which exhibits the changing expectations and sensibilities of the Generation Z viewer. The younger audience is represented by the characters playing the young versions of Dawson, Joey, and Pacey—the high-school age daughter of one of Joey's professors and her friends. During filming of Dawson's autobiographical film, these actors, acting as the voice of the "new teen audience" have a much different response to the pilot than high-school age viewers in the late 1990s did. For example, the actress who plays Joey assumes that Dawson is gay and that Joey is a lesbian (because she is an uptight tomboy who puts her schoolwork ahead of romance). In some ways, this reflects the writers' respect for teens' astuteness; Kevin Williamson is gay and has said in many interviews that *Dawson's Creek* is autobiographical and the character Dawson represents him, while Joey represents his best friend from childhood.¹²⁴ However, this is also points at changing priorities of the next generation of *Dawson's* viewers who will be able to watch the show from the beginning in syndication and on DVD. Actress Joey's assumption about "real" Joey's sexuality, for example, insinuates that

¹²⁴ See, for example, Jeffrey Epstein, "Kevin Williamson: Unbound," *The Advocate*, August 31, 1999, 44.

the new teen audience assumes that there must be something different about Joey that would cause her to put academics ahead of a relationship, while Generation Xers and Millennials would applaud her pursuit of self-fulfillment and lack of vanity.

As the title indicates, this episode and, by extension, the series itself, focuses not only on redemption, but also on one character in particular. “Joey Potter” is the focus of the episode title, but since this is such an important, summative episode, its focus suggests Joey is also the focus of the show itself. Although it is “Dawson’s” creek, Joey is the only character who appears in each of the show’s 128 episodes. Even though her place at the middle of a love triangle is the driving force of much of the show, she is never relegated to the position of “object” of another’s desire. Rather, she takes active roles in her relationships. For example, the love triangle between Pacey, Joey, and Dawson develops in Season Three. In the finale episode of that season, “True Love,” Pacey plans to leave for the summer on a boat trip, which Joey claims he is using as a means to avoid the complications of their relationship. Rather than actively pursuing her, he paints a wall with the message “Ask me to stay,” so that any decision made about the future of their relationship rests squarely on her shoulders.

Joey propels much of the show’s action, but nowhere is this clearer than in “Joey Potter and the Capeside Redemption.” It is Joey who unites the characters in support of Dawson and Joey who narrates the episode, closing it by saying, “we were there for each other in a time in our lives that defined us all, a time in our lives that we will never forget. I can't swear this is exactly how it happened. But this is how it felt.” In

this way, Joey becomes the series narrator and, implicitly, its producer. The premise of Joey as the heart of the show is supported in the finale episode, when Joey explains, “The eternal triangle, it’s based on actual events... It’s about [Joey] making a decision with herself.” This is a message not only about the character Joey, but to the viewing audience itself. Ultimately, *Dawson’s Creek* is empowering female viewers and supporting the idea of the independent woman in charge of her own narrative, a concept that will fall by the wayside in later post-Millennial teen-oriented programming.

The Finale

By providing “redemption” to the characters in the episode before the finale, the writing staff of the sixth season of *Dawson’s* allowed Kevin Williamson to use the finale for some redemption of his own. Although it is a continuation of the storylines that harkens back to previous seasons, the final episode of the series can, in many ways, be viewed as a standalone work. From a technical standpoint, the approximate running time without commercials is feature film length. Where the narrative is concerned, the series flashes forward five years into the future to the main characters’ mid-twenties. The series, for this final episode, is reborn and Williamson is able to provide the viewer with a kind of “ultimate” resolution of the characters (by seeing how their lives unfold after college), while keeping the liberty to disregard storylines from Season Six in favor of the messages he hoped to convey when he conceived the series.

The technique of moving forward in time is one that has been employed subsequently in several teen dramas, so it's worth explaining how Williamson employs it here. As with the rest of the series, Williamson maintains a sense of relative realism. Three years after college graduation, Joey is living with her boyfriend in New York City and working as a junior editor at a publishing company. Following training as a line cook, Pacey is running his own restaurant in his hometown, which he funded through several loans he is actively working to pay off. Jen is an unwed, single mother; her profession is initially unclear, but it is revealed over the course of the episode that she has a terminal heart disease that was discovered during her pregnancy, and her imminent death is the driving force for most of the action in the episode. Jack is a teacher at the high school he attended and is secretly dating a man who refuses to come out of the closet. It is only Dawson who has achieved unusual success, working as a show runner for a teen drama, *The Creek*, based on his adolescence in Capeside.¹²⁵ Ultimately, the dreams of childhood, as well as the ideals presented in film, music, or television, are tempered by reality, but not destroyed. While not infinitely wealthy or famous, each character (even Jen, who, prior to her death, records a video of motherly advice for her daughter) finds some degree of success and personal satisfaction through hard work and personal relationships.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Given that *Dawson's Creek* is autobiographical and Dawson represents Williamson, it could be argued that this outcome does not interfere with a sense of realism.

¹²⁶ This is conveyed particularly through Joey's character, who says in the finale,

With these emotional and personal developments as a backdrop, Williamson uses Jen's final speech (the video recorded for her daughter) as an opportunity to deliver his final message to viewers. She says:

I thought I would give you a little list of the things that I wish for you. Well, there's the obvious. An education. Family. Friends... Be sure to make mistakes. Make a lot of them, because there's no better way to learn and to grow... I've never really believed in God... But I hope that you are able to believe in God, because the thing that I've come to realize... is that it just doesn't matter if God exists or not. The important thing is for you to believe in something... And then there's love... when you find that love, wherever you find it, whoever you choose, don't run away from it. But you don't have to chase after it either... remember, to love is to live.

Through his message, and the death of the character Jen, Williamson is placing the perceived drama of high school into perspective. Rather than the escapism that is employed in shows that follow *Dawson's*, Williamson instead focuses on realism. At one point, he even dismisses the fiction that inspired his early work on the series and shaped its overall development when Dawson says at the end of the episode, "This writer has decided it doesn't matter how it ends. Because fiction is fiction. For the first time in a long time, my life is real. It doesn't matter who ends up with who."¹²⁷

Although the author believes that the final couplings of the series do not matter, in Joey's selection of Pacey over Dawson to be what the audience is led to perceive as her future husband, it can be argued that the entire context of the program changes.¹²⁸ The Pacey/Joey pairing is the only sexual experience represented in the

"Dreams aren't perfect, Dawson. They come true, not free."

¹²⁷ "...Must Come to an End," *Dawson's Creek*, the WB, May 14, 2003.

¹²⁸ In the commentary for the Series Finale, Williamson reveals that his decision to

show that occurs in the context of a committed, romantic relationship.¹²⁹ In this new context, the Pacey/Joey relationship serves as the hallmark relationship with which to view the series, and provides evidence of one of the program's overarching messages. Williamson is reinforcing the idea that the escapist tendencies of youth (and the pre-September 11 era) must be abandoned in favor of adult realities, in this case, a relationship based on growing and maturing with a person instead of living in the past.¹³⁰

However, this episode, as with the rest of the series, is not without nostalgia. Much of the episode, via Dawson's show and "home movies,"¹³¹ recreates elements of the first season. Clare Birchall notes that through stylistic choices that convey a

select Pacey over Dawson as Joey's final partner was somewhat arbitrary, owing to time constraints he was under due working on multiple projects simultaneously, rather than a component of a final authorial message he hoped to convey with the finale. Given Williamson's acknowledgement that professional obligations hindered the creative process in some respects, this is the one instance where I posit intent beyond what has been explicitly stated by the author.

¹²⁹ Although Dawson and Joey do have one sexual encounter ("The Lost Weekend," [Season 5, Episode 2]), it amounts more to an instance of the "culture of hookups" (a one-time sexual encounter that does not result in a meaningful relationship) often discussed among youth in the twenty-first century. See, for example, Caitlin Carroll, "The hookup culture: Having casual relationships is the new dating," *The GW Hatchet*, October 3, 2005, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.gwhatchet.com/2005/10/03/the-hookup-culture-having-casual-relationships-is-the-new-dating/> and Charles M. Blow, "The Demise of Dating," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2008, accessed March 31, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/13/opinion/13blow.html>.

¹³⁰ In the Series Finale, during the scene in which Pacey confesses his love to Joey and lets her "off the hook," telling her to be with whoever makes her happiest, Joey comments about her relationship with Dawson, "He's my soul mate. He's tied to my childhood, and it's a love that is pure and eternally innocent."

¹³¹ These "home movies" are the footage that was used for the opening credits in the first season (and elements of the opening credits thereafter).

“home-video aesthetic... We are encouraged to view the characters as if we are looking at camcorder footage of friends... Group shots complicate the possibility that one of the friends is filming the sequence. The viewer is therefore put behind the camera... the cumulative effect is overwhelmingly one of nostalgia.”¹³² Music used in the first season is also repeated throughout the finale, being employed almost as a means of harkening back to more innocent times that cannot be reclaimed. However, this nostalgia isn’t relegated to sentimentality; it is also proactive. At the end of the episode, Joey’s nephew climbs into Dawson’s little sister’s window (the window of Dawson’s bedroom, which Joey climbed through for most of the series). This scene is repeated when the character modeled after Joey on Dawson’s show enters the Dawson character’s window and the two kiss, recreating the first season finale episode of *Dawson’s Creek*. In both fiction and “reality,” Williamson provides a representation of the innocence of his youth, and the youth of his characters, to a new generation.

Dawson’s Creek as Part of a Cultural Dialogue

Previously, I discussed *Dawson’s* assertion—via the first season’s self-parodic and self-reflexive recreations of film and, ultimately, television—that it has joined the cultural dialogue and should be as familiar to television viewers as any of the other television shows or movies that its characters so frequently reference. This is significant because Williamson uses the finale not only as an “emotional payoff” to

¹³² Birchall 2004, 182.

provide the closure long-time viewers of any series would expect at its conclusion, but also to assert *Dawson's* place in the cultural lexicon for all television viewers, including its detractors. (For example, Williamson responds to critics by having ancillary characters, such as Joey's fiancé, provide criticism that mimics early critiques of the show, which lead characters are able to respond to.) This self-assertion into popular culture history is what makes *Dawson's Creek* not only worthy of review, but also a reliable marker of changing patterns in popular culture narratives.

The view that one's own show, particularly a show targeted to such a specific audience, should be recognized nationally would be a conceited stance for any writer/creator if it were not accurate. But it is accurate, and as a means to support this claim, I'd like to point to several instances in which *Dawson's Creek* is referenced in popular culture over the course of its run and in the years following. As mentioned previously, WB programming frequently referenced other shows on the network under the assumption a viewer of one program would likely view another.¹³³

However, the expectation that the teen viewer will understand a reference to *Dawson's Creek* extends beyond the WB. *Dawson's Creek* mentions can be traced as early as September 1998, eight months after the show premiered. In the appropriately

¹³³ I have already pointed out several instances of *Dawson's* referencing other programs, would like to include a few examples of reciprocity as well. In the Season Five episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* "Out of My Mind," one character yells at the television, "Oh, Pacey! You blind idiot. Can't you see she doesn't love you?" In Season Seven episode "Chosen," the title character of *Buffy* has an exchange with an ex-boyfriend in which she says, "Are you just gonna come here and go all Dawson on me every time I have a boyfriend?"

titled *Urban Legend*, a horror movie (one of many to release after the horror resurgence spawned by the Williamson-penned *Scream*) in which the killer murders victims based on urban legends, Joshua Jackson (who also played Pacey on *Dawson's*) plays one of the main characters. At one point, his character starts his car and, to his disgust, the radio immediately blares "I Don't Wanna Wait," the *Dawson's Creek* theme song. The following year, *10 Things I Hate About You*, a romantic comedy targeting the teenage demographic, was released. In one scene, one of the main characters asks her father for permission to go on a date as part of a "normal" teenage experience. He responds, "What's normal? Those damn... Dawson's river kids sleeping in each other's beds and whatnot?"

References to the show extend beyond programming targeted specifically to *Dawson's* target audience. The plot of a March 2000 episode of *Family Guy*, "Death is a Bitch," focused on Peter's attempts to kill the cast of *Dawson's Creek*, which ultimately ended when he realized, "If I do, then I have nothing to watch on Wednesdays." Later that year, *South Park* also aired a *Dawson*-centric episode entitled "Trapper Keeper" whose storyline revolves around a trapper keeper with the cast of *Dawson's Creek* on the cover (a picture of the cast is shown throughout the episode).¹³⁴ Six years later (three years after *Dawson's* went off the air), in an episode entitled "Peterotica" two of the main characters in *Family Guy* plan various ways to

¹³⁴ A trapper keeper is a loose leaf binder with multiple pocket folders that was popular, particularly among American elementary and middle school students, in the 1980s and 1990s. They featured a variety of designs, from popular cartoons to abstract art, and are easily identifiable by both male and female Millennials.

make money, including making a teen drama, which they call “Quahog Creek.” Both of these programs are half hour animated series intended for mature audiences, predominately males in their 20s and 30s.¹³⁵ The willingness of shows that target an older male audience to include references to *Dawson’s Creek*, some that drive entire storylines, demonstrates that *Dawson’s* had a significant cultural impact. Whether or not the references are favorable, it is expected they will be understood by the viewer.

This phenomena is particularly notable because of its persistence, even following the end of *Dawson’s Creek* in 2003 and the consolidation of the WB with UPN in 2006. For example, in January 2007, the title character of the FOX drama *House, M.D.* asks a patient if he has ever seen *Dawson’s Creek*. A few months later, NBC aired an episode of its sitcom *The Office* titled “Dinner Party” in which *Dawson’s Creek* is again mentioned. Once again, these are references outside of *Dawson’s* target audience and removed from a time when the show and its cast were readily present on magazines and in entertainment specials.¹³⁶ *Dawson’s* has had a clear effect on its successors, and the elements they took from the program, as well as what they altered, are indicative of the changes that resulted in popular culture following September 11, 2001.

¹³⁵ Andy Dehnart, “‘Family Guy’ is no cheap ‘Simpsons’ knockoff,” MSNBC.com, November 5, 2007, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/21627779/ns/today-entertainment/t/family-guy-no-cheap-simpsons-knockoff/>.

¹³⁶ Many viewers of *The Office* and *House, M.D.* were also in *Dawson’s* target age demographic; however, *Dawson’s* was specifically female-oriented, while both contemporary programs attempt to reach both male and female audiences. Additionally, these programs target a much broader audience than *Dawson’s*, including Gen X and Boomers.

Contemporary TV and the Changing Viewer Experience

While many of the changes to television narrative are indicative of broader societal changes, the technological advancements that altered the way viewers interact with television and, as a result, the way programming responds to viewers, cannot be understated. As evidenced by Stepakoff's accounts of the impact of viewer response in writing Season Three of *Dawson's Creek*, the WB's peak ratings coincided with the early stages of mass teen consumption of online material. The saturation of social media into mainstream society has only intensified this involvement.

In addition to the way viewers interact with television, the way television is viewed has also significantly changed since *Dawson's Creek* went off the air. Through the late 1990s, if a viewer didn't plan to watch television or set a VCR to record it, then there was little opportunity to view the episode unless it was repeated during the summer hiatus. During *Dawson's* final season, DVD release of TV shows became commonplace and the first season appeared on DVD a month before the Series Finale.¹³⁷ Television viewing experience was now untethered from a specific time or channel, and the DVD-release model became the standard, with current shows marketing DVDs of the previous season the month before the new season begins.

¹³⁷ "Dawson's Creek (1998)," TVShowsonDVD.com, August 14, 2001, accessed November 30, 2011 <http://www.tvshowsondvd.com/shows/Dawsons-Creek/350>.

Since the founding of TiVo in 1997, digital video recorders (DVRs) have consistently risen in popularity as well.¹³⁸ Observing TiVo's success, cable providers began to offer DVRs as part of service packages and by March 2009, over thirty percent of households had at least one DVR.¹³⁹ Between DVRs and the availability of programming for free or a small fee (via iTunes, mobile apps, Netflix, Hulu/Hulu Plus, and video-on-demand services), viewers are able to more easily stay current with shows as their plotlines unfold. This makes television programs more accessible for the casual viewer who may not be willing to spend \$20–\$50 on a box set of the entire season. In short, television programs are becoming more accessible. Taking this into consideration, the presence of *Dawson's Creek* in contemporary popular culture is even more notable, as, at the time of its original run, the average viewer had to actively seek out the show during its regular timeslot, rather than watching casually, then “catching up” with TiVo, online, on a tablet/mobile phone, or by accessing video-on-demand.

Teen Programming in Transition

A review of teen-oriented programming from 2003 to the present indicates that *Dawson's Creek* demonstrated to television executives that the average teen viewer is more culturally aware than they had previously imagined. However, popular

¹³⁸ Staff writer, “About TiVo, Inc.,” TiVo.com, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.tivo.com/abouttivo/aboutushome/index.html>.

¹³⁹ “How DVRs Are Changing the Television Landscape,” *NielsenWire*, April 30, 2009, accessed November 30, 2011, http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/how-dvrs-are-changing-the-television-landscape/.

culture references are rarely integral to the plot of these post-*Dawson's Creek* shows, and their implementation is not a mark of quick-wittedness, as it had been in programming on the WB. Rather, references are frequently flippant and can be easily ignored. Teens represented in contemporary programming have become hyper-aware to the extent that popular culture is almost passé. There is also the sense that the modern character has an awareness of the global political climate, but political issues are equally avoided.¹⁴⁰

The apparent dismissal of these cultural and political issues is replaced with more than the self-awareness of television of the late 1990s; the void is filled by self-obsession. This is not the characters' obsessions with themselves as much as it is a show's obsession with itself. That is, the viewer is only expected to follow the show, its characters, and its plots, rather than be familiar with (or willing to learn about) popular culture beyond the program itself. Perhaps in part because the accessibility of programming beyond its scheduled air dates makes it more likely the viewer consistently follows a show, plotlines for contemporary teen programming have become increasingly complex and outlandish. Rather than reflecting sociopolitical tensions, the purpose of teen-oriented programming is now complex, game-like escapism. As a result, the relationship-driven storylines of *Dawson's Creek* and its contemporaries have been replaced by plot-driven dramas.

¹⁴⁰ *Dawson's Creek* did not directly address political issues, but one of its contemporaries (also known for fast-paced, culturally aware dialogue), *Gilmore Girls*, did regularly. For example, in the Series Finale one of the title characters accepts a job following Barack Obama on his presidential campaign.

This transition can be directly observed by the shifts in programming that occurred when the WB and UPN merged to create The CW. Seven shows made the transition from the WB to The CW. Of those, only four survived the new network's first season. Of three that remained, one was a reality show, two involved supernatural elements, and the other was a teen drama in the vein of *Dawson's Creek*. While the teen drama, *One Tree Hill*, has maintained relative success (although ratings are unremarkable, the show has survived nine seasons and aired its final episode in April 2012), it is worth noting that this originally *Dawson's*-modeled-show used the scheduled high school graduation of its characters to fast-forward four years into the future. As a result, the show, which (unlike most other teen dramas) used two seasons to signify one school year, "caught up" with its Millennial audience, most of whom were, at that point, in college or college graduates.¹⁴¹

The CW effectively distinguished itself as a youth-oriented station; however, it became clear early on that the youth market it was targeting had changed significantly since *Dawson's Creek* aired. New teen-oriented dramas from The CW that had proven at least moderately successful (lasting at least two seasons) include *Gossip Girl* (2007–), *90210* (a spinoff of *Beverly Hills, 90210* [2008–]), and *The*

¹⁴¹ The characters instantly "grew up" and had jobs/children, which effectively repositioned the show for a new target audience, early adults, as opposed to teens. Formatting was also changed. In the early seasons, the main character would frequently narrate episodes and refer to life lessons as they relate to music or literature, an element that was removed from later seasons.

Vampire Diaries (2009–).¹⁴² Of these, the show that most clearly represents new teen-oriented programming is *Gossip Girl*.

Gossip Girl: The New Standard

Gossip Girl, aside from the age of its characters and dual focus on the issues of teens as well as their parents, has little in common with *Dawson's Creek*. Set in an elite private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, taglines for *Gossip* declared, “You’re nobody until you’re talked about.”¹⁴³ Based on a novel series of the same name, social media drives most of the show’s the action.¹⁴⁴ The story follows a group of high-society teens and is told through the perspective of an unknown narrator who receives secrets about the most popular students at the school (which “she” obtains via text and e-mail from outside sources, including principals, supporting characters, and anonymous citizens) and delivers the information via her blog and “blasts” texts sent to her subscribers (the entire student body and, in later seasons, many New York residents). The premise on which *Gossip Girl* is based is

¹⁴² Interestingly, this series was created by Kevin Williamson. Supernatural elements drive the series, which centers on a love triangle between a high school student and two vampires, but Williamson has significantly toned down the quick-witted pop culture references he became known for. One reviewer commented, “Williamson's version of *Diaries* dares to have the kind of flip poor taste that high schoolers such as these characters would engage in,” a far cry from reviews citing the hyper-intellectualism and maturity of the series premiere of *Dawson's*. Ken Tucker, “TV Review: *The Vampire Diaries*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, September 1, 2009, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20417740,00.html>.

¹⁴³ Staff writer, Internet Movie Database, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm2400818688/tt0397442>.

¹⁴⁴ The plot of the series diverges from the plot of the novels (by Cecily von Ziegesar), but the premise, characters, and presence of social media are the same.

that the story is only worth telling because of who it is being told about, those worthy of the attention of an entire school and, as children of the wealthy New York elite, the city at large as well.¹⁴⁵ Essentially, the “average” teen is no longer of interest.

Despite their differences, each series garnered attention from parents and critics for frank presentations of teen sexuality, but where *Dawson's* sought to defend its portrayal as both realistic and responsible, marketing efforts for *Gossip Girl* used this criticism to attract viewers. In the second season advertising ran quotes from the show's detractors, such as “Every Parent's Nightmare” and “Mind-Blowingly Inappropriate.”¹⁴⁶ True to the show's nature, this campaign focused on shock value, rather than a realistic high school experience.

While *Gossip Girl*, like *Dawson's*, argues that parents are no more emotionally mature than their children, these New York teens face far different issues. Where *Dawson's Creek* is relationship-driven, *Gossip Girl* is propelled by extravagant, complex plots with little basis in reality for the viewer. These usually take the form of “schemes” by principal characters; for example, in one episode a young man “traded” his girlfriend to his uncle for the deed to a hotel; the girl became involved in the plot without her boyfriend's knowledge to see if he would carry it out.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ This is consistently reinforced, as characters read about themselves in the paper, typically the *New York Post*'s famed “Page 6.”

¹⁴⁶ Roger Catlin, “Bad Reviews Make Good Ads for *Gossip Girl*,” *Hartford Courant TV Eye*, August 1, 2008, accessed November 30, 2011, http://blogs.courant.com/roger_catlin_tv_eye/2008/08/bad-reviews-make-good-ads-for.html.

¹⁴⁷ “Inglorious Bassterds,” *Gossip Girl*, The CW, April 5, 2010.

The best way to illustrate the difference in style in each program is to compare two episodes side-by-side. In the episode “Modern Romance” (title later changed to “Double Date”) in Season One of *Dawson’s Creek*, Dawson attempts to remain friends with an ex-girlfriend by arranging a double date with her and her new beau, while Pacey and Joey work on an extra credit project (Pacey to avoid failing, Joey to enhance her resume for admissions officers and college scholarships). An episode of *Gossip Girl*, “The Townie” (Season 4, Episode 11), follows two principal characters as they attempt to locate a girl who is trying to sabotage their friend and end up at the boarding school of another character.¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, they discover that a teacher at this school was accused of statutory rape by the mother of their friend because rumors were circulating that her daughter, then 15, was sleeping with teachers to get ahead academically. Despite the allegations being false, the mother used her substantial political power to have the teacher jailed and his sister is the girl plotting sabotage to seek revenge.

Interestingly, though it diverges in plot devices, *Gossip Girl* maintains another tradition begun by *Dawson’s Creek*, the appropriation of popular culture in formulating episode titles (examples include “The Undergraduates,” “Enough About Eve,” “Inglorious Bastards,” “The Dark Night,” and “Bad News Blair”). However, unlike *Dawson’s Creek*, aside from reflecting the overall theme of the episode, the movie or TV show introduced in the title is not incorporated into the storyline in any

¹⁴⁸ This title is derived from the 2010 film *The Town* which co-starred *Gossip Girl* star Blake Lively.

meaningful way, nor is any other reference to popular culture outside of the New York social scene. References to popular culture outside of current trends are relegated to the realm of, at best, the quirky. An ongoing storyline in Season Four is the unlikely friendship between one of the “in crowd” and a less popular counterpart where the two secretly meet to watch movies from the 1940s and 1950s, an activity no one else in their social circle will participate in.

The significance of the divergent plot techniques and use of references to film and television has multiple implications. An understanding of and appreciation for popular culture outside of the “now” was not forced in *Dawson's Creek*, but it was actively encouraged. In *Gossip Girl*, it is not only marginalized, but the expectation is that if you fully appreciate a reference to a classic film, you are not part of the mainstream. In one way, there is the expectation that the audience will have a basic understanding of a reference because of global awareness, but any nuances (subtle references, beyond mentioning a famous person or well-known film title) are relegated to situations in which a character is acknowledging that he or she is breaking with their peer group and that is not completely acceptable. Simultaneously, there are frequent references to places in New York City, exclusive clubs, and cameos by members of New York high society, which serve to exclude viewers unfamiliar with the intricacies of New York City culture.

This is especially true of references to popular culture of the 1990s, a topic that is addressed with some consistency because one of the main character's parents was in a fictional alternative band (Lincoln Hawk) in the 1990s. Unlike television

characters of the 1990s who reveled in their knowledge of 1970s and 1980s popular culture, the main characters do not like or even remember the music of the 90s. In the episode “Woman on the Verge” in Season One, for example, the character in the band is invited to perform at a 90s reunion concert sponsored by *Rolling Stone* and hosted by 90s alt-rock songstress Lisa Loeb. A storyline causes the characters to converge at this event, and two of them refer to the band as “Leaky Hawk.” In this sense, *Gossip Girl* serves as a bridge from the television programs of the 1990s and, at the same time, effectively dismisses them as irrelevant to modern society.

Gossip Girl actively hyper-dramatizes situations at the expense of youthful innocence. This element responds to the national awareness of global crises following the terrorist attacks on the United States. Whether or not the average teen engages in sexual activity or excessive drinking and drug use, maintaining a “Spielberg-esque” innocence through high school is no longer a possibility, and the creator of *Gossip Girl* recognizes that. Equally, the fantastic plots related to murder, embezzlement, and international royalty serve as a means of escapism. Television is no longer about what the viewer has, but what the viewer wants (or should want), whether or not that viewer can realistically attain it. Moreover, no method to reach these goals, outside of being born into wealth, is presented. *Gossip Girl* fans Jessica Pressier and Chris Rovzar support this premise in their article “The Genius of Gossip Girl.” They observe, “on *Gossip Girl*, we do not have to judge [the wealthy of New York City], or ourselves. The show mocks our superficial fantasies while satisfying them, allowing us to partake in the over-the-top pleasures of the irresponsible superrich without

anxiety or guilt or moralizing.”¹⁴⁹ In a sense, the fans of *Gossip Girl*, like “Gossip Girl” herself, are acting as voyeurs, looking in on the lives of the wealthy they could otherwise only imagine.

Gossip Girl also signified a change in the way teenagers watch television, as advances in technology brought new outlets for viewer engagement. Its first season, *Gossip Girl* maintained consistently low ratings (less than half of *The O.C.*’s viewership the season it was canceled) on The CW, while new episodes consistently debuted at the most-downloaded slot on iTunes. Pressier and Rovzar noted that “this is the first show that seems to have succeed *primarily* on the Internet.” Not only is technology changing when and how viewers watch, it is also expanding how they interact with the show. Pressier and Rovzar continue:

[fans] post sightings of the actors on gossip blogs and exchange rumors (about both the show and its stars) on fan sites. You can even play *Gossip Girl*’s Upper East Side on Second Life. It’s not appointment television; it’s 24-hour conversation... And the whole experience can happen sans television.¹⁵⁰

When *Gossip Girl* debuted, this presented a new challenge for advertisers, who had to increasingly rely on in-program product placement to generate revenue.

Changes in product placement are a final indicator of the noticeable differences between *Dawson’s Creek*-era programming and teen oriented dramas today. As discussed previously, *Dawson’s* secured a number of cross-promotional deals,

¹⁴⁹ Jessica Pressier and Chris Rovzar, “The Genius of Gossip Girl,” *New York Magazine*, April 21, 2008, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.nymag.com/arts/tv/features/46225/>.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

including agreements with J. Crew in Season One and American Eagle for the remainder of the series. As part of the agreement with J. Crew, the four principal cast members appeared in that clothier's "Fresh Start 1998" catalog. Clothing worn by the cast in the catalog, such as a \$45 pair of shoes and \$28 t-shirt, appeared throughout the first season of the series (with some articles of clothing worn in multiple episodes). These clothes, while not inexpensive, are affordable for the average middle-income viewer (and outfits worn on the show became even more accessible when *Dawson's* partnered with the youth-oriented American Eagle). In contrast, it is not unusual for a skirt featured on *Gossip Girl* to sell for \$1,000, with prices only escalating from there.¹⁵¹ Even comparatively moderately priced items, available for sale directly at TheCW.com, are well out of range for the average middle class teen.¹⁵²

In April 2011, Warner Brothers Television announced a partnership between *Gossip Girl* and The Gilt Groupe, a website that offers time-sensitive discounts on luxury items.¹⁵³ The result was a section of the site dedicated to the show. While,

¹⁵¹ Staff writer, "Blair Waldorf," Pop Sugar's CelebStyle, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.celebstyle.com/Blair-Waldorf-Style-11763498>.

¹⁵² As of July 1, 2011, the site featured a pair of shoes (\$119), a faux pearl necklace (\$179), and summer-hiatus sale items that included several purses (one was \$349, discounted from \$540).

¹⁵³ Danielle Turchiano, "*Gossip Girl* Teams with Gilt Groupe for a Fan Fashion Giveaway," *LA Examiner*, April 18, 2011, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.examiner.com/tv-insider-in-los-angeles/gossip-girl-teams-with-gilt-groupe-for-a-fan-fashion-giveaway>. Gilt Groupe was founded in 2007 as an upscale, discount invitation-only women's apparel and accessories site. To join, one needed to be invited by an existing member, who were each given a limited number of invitations. It is unclear how the first members received an invitation, but I expect

again, items are offered at a discounted rate, the costs are still high enough to prevent the average viewer from participating, further distancing the viewer from the lifestyle shown on television. Despite advances in technology and social media, situations such as this demonstrate a detachment of the contemporary teen drama from a reality in which previous programming was deeply rooted.

Targeting Teen Themes in *Friday Night Lights*

Where *Gossip Girl* demonstrates what teenagers are watching, *Friday Night Lights* (2006–2011) provides an example of what they aren't. Set in fictional Dillion, Texas, *Friday Night Lights* (based on a book and film of the same name) chronicled a high school obsessed with football, concentrating primarily on its football team, their coach, and his family. Like *Dawson's Creek*, it focused equally on parents and their children, revolved primarily around low and middle-income families, and followed (mostly) realistic, character-driven storylines.¹⁵⁴ Unlike *Dawson's*, there is much less reliance on music to convey emotion or theme (aside from the instrumental theme

that will be revealed in a book, *By Invitation Only: How We Built Gilt Groupe and Changed the Way Millions Shop*, written by the founders of Gilt Groupe, that is scheduled for publication in April 2012. By April 2011, the site expanded to include men's and children's apparel, travel services, and home furnishings. It is no longer invitation-only, but interested parties much request membership at Gilt.com or on their Facebook page. Masha Zager, "Exclusive From Gilt Groupe: Flash Sales, Flash Delivery," *Apparel*, April 7, 2011, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://apparel.edgl.com/case-studies/Exclusive-From-Gilt-Groupe--Flash-Sales,-Flash-Delivery72044>.

¹⁵⁴ Also like *Dawson's Creek*, I exclude a few episode/plotlines from this statement. Facing cancellation, the writers crafted a few outlandish storylines in an effort to generate viewer interest. Critics attribute this as an effort to bring in new viewers and, as a result, generally exclude those plotlines from any review of the series.

song), there are very few cultural references, and, ultimately, the series obtained the status of quality television.¹⁵⁵ Despite its “quality” status and significant advertising from NBC (whose production company, NBCUniversal, produced the series), *Friday Night Lights* received consistently low ratings. It survived only two seasons (one of which was cut short by the 2007–2008 Writer’s Strike) on network television, then was moved to DirecTV, where it aired for three half-seasons before being cancelled.¹⁵⁶ In fact, *Friday Night Lights* was picked up by teen-driven network ABC Family to run in syndication, but pulled by the station after fewer than five months due to low-ratings.¹⁵⁷ The show’s similarities to reality programming are perhaps the most obvious, and most interesting, in exploring why teen viewers did not tune in.

¹⁵⁵ In addition to being cited as one of the top ten shows of the year in publications such as *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *The New York Times*, *Friday Night Lights* earned several critical awards, including three Emmys, three AFI awards, and a Peabody, among others. I will not focus on its quality status here, as I am using this series to pinpoint what teen viewers are looking for in a program. In this sense, the only significance of its recognition as “quality television” is that it is unlikely teenagers did not tune in because the program was ill-conceived or executed poorly. It is also important to note that although *Friday Night Lights* was high lauded, none of its young actors received any professional accolades, despite significant campaigning and critical praise for one actor in particular, who played a college freshman responding to the death of his father, who was killed while serving in Iraq.

¹⁵⁶ Adam Bryant, “*Friday Night Lights* Set to End After Fifth Season,” *TV Guide*, February 11, 2010, accessed December 6, 2011, <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Friday-Night-Lights-Ending-1014921.aspx>.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Ausiello, “ABC Family sacks *Friday Night Lights*,” EW.com, October 18, 2010, accessed December 6, 2011, <http://insidetv.ew.com/2010/10/18/abc-family-sacks-friday-night-lights/>. Meanwhile, programming like *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–), a series about five wealthy suburban teenagers being cyber-stalked by someone assuming the name of their dead best friend, has achieved success on the same network.

With its near reality-style presentation, *Friday Night Light* illuminates the exact elements of programming to which modern teens are (and are not) responding.

In her essay, “The Best Reality Show on Television,” Ariella Papa highlights many of the elements that lend a sense of realism to *Friday Night Lights*. These include: the exclusive use of on-location shooting (no sets were built for the series), real football players standing in for the football scenes, starting the pilot with a “cold open” (cutting straight to the story from commercial, without the use of a theme song or background narrative to serve as transition), frequent use of the first take, providing only loose dialogue, rather than set scripts, to the actors, and how episodes were shot, “no rehearsal, no blocking, just three cameras.”¹⁵⁸ As Papa puts it, “a fictional show, written by professional writers and acted by professional actors—felt totally authentic and true to life. The characters seemed more like people than the actual people in reality shows.”¹⁵⁹ Given its presentation as a reality-type show and the general success of reality TV and mockumentaries, the commercial failure of *Friday Night Lights* seems unlikely.¹⁶⁰ However, these similarities only highlight that reality is exactly what teenagers do not want. As Media Studies scholar Paul Levinson put it, “A story about real people with real problems... had an audience at

¹⁵⁸ Ariella Papa, “The Best Reality Show on Television,” in *A Friday Night Lights Companion: Love, Loss, and Football in Dillon, Texas*, ed. Leah Wilson (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2011), 77–81.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁶⁰ I am hesitant to use the term “mockumentary” to refer to *Friday Night Lights*, as the director, editors, and producers made a series of specific choices to convey realism, rather than mock reality programming, in the vein of the talking heads of *The Office*.

best only half the size of the one watching people fly and walk through walls in *Heroes*.”¹⁶¹ Despite its young, attractive cast, *Friday Night Lights* was unable to find an audience among teens because it was only broadcasting their lives (and the lives of those from a lower socioeconomic status) back to them, precisely what Generation Z is wants to avoid.¹⁶²

Conclusion

Teen-oriented programming has developed over the years as the expectations and social awareness of the teen audience have changed. Early teen programming, such as *Saved by the Bell*, was largely self-contained; that is, each episode was virtually a stand-alone and the viewer didn't need to see every episode to know what was going on. Additionally, few references were made to popular culture, outside of extremely general statements any television viewer at the time would understand (for example, Michael Jackson). At this point, studios and advertisers did not recognize a distinct teen culture and, as a result, failed to realize the revenue potential of collaborating with their teen audience.

¹⁶¹ Paul Levinson, “*Friday Night Lights*, NBC, and DirecTV; How an Unlikely Partnership Saved a Great Show and Pointed the Way to the Future” in *A Friday Night Lights Companion: Love, Loss, and Football in Dillon, Texas*, ed. Leah Wilson (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2011), 178.

¹⁶² The Millennials, however, tuned in to this series, which came in second place among 18- to 49-year-old women and seventh place among men of the same age when its third series premiere debuted on DirecTV. (Ibid., 183) The movement away from realism seems to be limited to the current teenage demographic.

By the mid-1990s, teen programming became more self-referential, as was the case with *Beverly Hills 90210*. The teen viewer was still treated gently, to a certain extent, in that many issue-oriented episodes that warned against, for example, the dangers of drugs, were incorporated into an overarching storyline. As the show progressed plots became more involved and it became necessary to follow the show regularly to understand what was going on. However, expectations for the viewer remained low and the only expectation was that he or she be aware of the roles of individual characters, rather than issues in society and culture more generally.

The WB achieved success (albeit short-lived) when they banked on the rapid development and economic viability of the Millennials in the late 1990s. During this period, programs such as *Dawson's Creek*, sought to obtain legitimation (for themselves and their audience) through the use of intertextuality, nostalgia, and mature dialogue. The WB showcased the height of cross-generational programming in the mid-to-late 1990s with shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Gilmore Girls*. The audience was assumed to have a certain level of maturity, as well as self and cultural awareness. There was also the expectation that teen viewers were interested in maintaining a dialogue with previous generations and, whether or not they had the answers to difficult questions, that they would be able to provide the wisdom associated with experience.

The September 11 terrorist attacks left the Millennials with a great cause. The Millennial Generation began to age, and Generation Z began to develop as the next highly remunerative, cultivatable marketing demographic. These new viewers, as the

result of a technological boom and rise in visibility of violence, such as the Columbine massacre, 9/11, and the War on Terror, have a new sensibility. As a result, the early 2000s witnessed a transition from cross-generational to postmodern self-referential teen-programming. There is the expectation that the audience is equally aware of sociopolitical and pop culture issues (in a sense, that the audience is mature), but this is only necessary on a broad level. As demonstrated by shows including *Gossip Girl* and *90210* (a spinoff of the early 1990s hit), the focus is more on a distance from reality in favor of representations of luxury (escapism).

It is impossible to predict what the next phase of teen programming will be, as it will be determined based on the changing sociocultural and political landscapes. However, I think it is clear that historical changes have a substantial impact on popular culture, if not always in the way that is expected. Since teens have become recognized as a viable market, shows targeted to that audience continue to mature, in both subject matter and plot development.¹⁶³ Likewise teen viewer participation will continue to shape the development of programming.¹⁶⁴ In an interview conducted by Henry Jenkins for his blog, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, Sharon Marie Ross, author of *Beyond the Box*, comments, “I think the teen demo is so key to success with many

¹⁶³ Modern teen programming, as opposed to shows from the late 1980s and early 1990s, involves complex plotlines that necessitate watching the show consistently to follow the action. In part, this can be attributed to the availability of on-demand services and DVRs.

¹⁶⁴ Again, whereas early teen-oriented programming was based on what executives assumed teen viewers would like to see, advancements in technology (blogs, twitter, Facebook, etc.) allow the audience to connect easily and routinely with a show’s writers and potentially influence how a plotline develops.

shows that producers are definitely working harder to listen to them, and reach out to them online and via script.”¹⁶⁵

As viewers continue to play an increasing role in the programming they watch, popular culture may ultimately become an accurate representation of the values and sensibilities of the audience it purports to represent. It is unlikely that *Dawson's Creek* would achieve the same level of success on The CW that it did on the WB, in large part because where the youth coming of age in the 2000s and 2010s value micronarratives (and, thanks to advances in technology, are able to easily view, generate, and disseminate these narratives), youth of the 1990s were simultaneously searching for legitimation and struggling to place themselves along a generational timeline. Representations of teenagers on television in the late 1990s focused on economically average, socially and culturally aware, relationship-oriented characters, but, after September 11, 2001, a distinct shift is noted in which programming focuses on wealthy characters, acutely aware of current trends (rather than cultural lessons from parents or elder siblings), whose storylines are propelled by plot. If popular culture is to be believed, children who grew up in the wake of the September 11 attacks exist in a society that has changed so radically there is no longer a use for nostalgia; rather, entertainment is primarily a means of escapism—coming of ages stories can no longer be delivered without a “hook,” whether it is wealth, celebrity, or

¹⁶⁵ Henry Jenkins, “Inviting Our Participation: An Interview with Sharon Marie Ross,” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, October 8, 2008, accessed November 30, 2011, http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/10/an_interview_with_sharon_marie.html.

supernatural elements. Given the success of current teen programming with its target audience, it is unlikely, in the absence of a significant cultural event, the course of this trend will alter.

Select Areas for Further Research

There is room to expand on this study by examining several other popular culture trends related to *Dawson's Creek* and the WB. The rise in popularity of supernatural programs, particularly vampire-based, following the end of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would be another way to examine the rise of escapism and movement away from reality in teen-oriented programming (Kevin Williamson's series *The Vampire Diaries* would be of particular interest here). The rise of reality programming may also be a use means to chart this trend. A comparison of the *Scream* franchise would be a useful way to examine changing perceptions of Kevin Williamson's role as author. A review of *Dawson's Creek* in its original broadcast format compared to its packaging for TBS, theWB.com, and on DVD may reveal modifications to cater to the new teen audience. The resurgence of *Dawson's Creek* in popular culture, for example, recent appearances by James Van Der Beek and Joshua Jackson on the comedy website FunnyorDie.com reprising their *Dawson's Creek* roles, may also be worthy of inquiry. Finally, a study of sitcoms targeted to Millennials may provide insight into that generation's evolving relationship with television.

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