

***Glee: Give Us Something to Sing About***  
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“*Gleeful* Teens: The Appeal of Mixing Past and Present Desires in Teen TV”

*Glee* presents a reception studies scholar such as myself with a wealth of things to study. I wish to contribute an examination of how *Glee* blends past and present desires in a way that fits within the lineage of teen TV—specifically, the difficulty of defining the genre, given many teen shows’ cross-generational fan bases. *Glee* also blends such desires within the narrative (its use of adults thinking about their teen pasts), and also within the diegesis (its musical reliance on past eras of hit songs). What can such multiple layerings of desire tell us about the appeal of the show in the 2010s? How does the FOX network and the press rhetoric surrounding *Glee* fit in with this thematic? Points for discussion...:

So let’s start with the conundrum of whether or not *Glee* is, in fact, a teen show. I opened the class I am teaching on teen TV this semester by asking my students what qualifies as a teen show—what elements are necessary? Note to other contributors—I have to give this to you before the first day of classes—so I’ll give you the results at the conference! :D But my own thoughts on this follow...When trying to figure out what to show in my class, I got into several debates with people about whether or not certain shows “counted” as teen. One recurring theme was audience—if a lot of adults watched a show, many surmised the show was “not teen,” regardless of content. There was not a little snobbery in such a classification: if adults were watching, the show must somehow be offering “more” than what teen shows tend to offer. I am more interested for our purposes here, though, on how the cross-generational fan base of *Glee* might speak to how many teen shows (and yes, I count *Glee* as a teen show) trigger a desire among adult viewers to think back on their own teen years with a blend of both fondness and regrets.

*Glee* capitalizes on this somewhat irresistible pull of the teen years for adults in several ways: by offering us teachers who are constantly immersed in teen culture, by mirroring the issues teens are facing among those teachers, and by focusing almost obsessively on the music of teen generations gone by. I will leave for discussion at the roundtable why adults are specifically drawn to pondering their teen years, but put forward the idea that adults with Millennial kids especially might tend towards this. Research on this demographic notes that Millennials are strongly bonded with their parents—in short, there is less traditional rebellion than we typically associate with teens among this cohort. Creating a show about teens and parents not getting along could potentially alienate Millennial viewers. By linking the adults of *Glee*’s world intricately with the teens, *Glee* neatly sidesteps this problem and also brings adults along for the ride.

I’m tempted to say Millennials are also drawn to 80s music, but as some scholars have noted, it’s not uncommon for a teen show to reference the music of the adults’ teen pasts—we saw this in *MSCL* (witness “I Wanna Be Sedated.”) Further, the use of older generations’ teen music anthems in *Glee* is a nice trick of the old (Madonna, for example) with the new-old (bursting out in song and dance resonates with both 80s teen culture—

*Flashdance, Fame, Footloose*—and we could have an entire discussion on the remakes occurring here—and also current teen culture—*HSM, Camp Rock, Hannah/Miley*).

Last, the press and network rhetoric surrounding *Glee* have focused primarily on its quick, unexpected rise to fame; its guest stars and tribute episodes; and to a smaller degree its characters (most often Sue Sylvester and Kurt). In short, most of the press offers surface discussion of the series, bothering less with content and themes than style and flash. One might say the press treats *Glee* like the Homecoming Queen. This framework situates the show yet again as teen (stereotypically favoring style over substance), albeit in a roundabout way. Can we expect *Glee* fatigue or backlash soon—or will this be the season the press and network start taking the show more seriously in terms of its content?