

#1~ Tweens, Teens, and In Betweens: The Legacy of the WB Position Paper Sharon Ross

One of the things I hate to hear most as a TV scholar and teacher is the phrase “Back when I was growing up, TV was....” (fill-in-the-blank). Yet, it is my position that when it comes to the legacy of the WB most directly—when it comes to the CW network—the WB wins hands down in having offered inventive approaches to meaningful story-telling on TV for teens and young adults. On the other hand, if we look past “broadcast” TV to cable, the WB’s legacy with regards to story-telling clearly has packed a punch. And thus I claim that the WB matters not only historically to TV but more broadly to U.S. culture.

Disney. Teen Nick. ABC Family. Even the “original” youth channel, MTV. Each of these entities, especially collectively, learned the lessons of the WB’s rise and fall quite well.

First: Cable allows you to do things you simply cannot on broadcast. I am talking to some degree about content, but more about the fact that the expectations are higher for the CW when it comes to numbers and ratings than they are for the cable netlets. Correspondingly, when you are part of an empire birthed via vertical and horizontal integration, you have more resources and can take more risks—if *Pretty Little Liars* had been a flop, it’s ok: there’s enough Disney/ABC money in the coffers to allow for some failure.

Second: Teen TV is still TV and Teen TV viewers are still TV viewers—they expect quality within this “genre” to the same degree that adult viewers expect it elsewhere. (Which isn’t to say adult viewers aren’t watching these channels—they most certainly are, but that’s ahead). While each of these channels has had (and currently has) some really ridiculously problematic shows, they also have some class acts. I don’t want to rattle off a list; suffice to say, though, that the cream of the crop follows some basic rules established by the WB:

embrace high production values, appropriate to the content...Say what you will about *Teen Mom*, it touched a cord with teen girls in this country and part of this was due to the unembellished look of the show. Likewise, the polished cinematography of *Pretty Little Liars* gives weight to the suspense-driven narrative. In short, don’t dumb down the aesthetics—this is a media-savvy generation of viewers who expect to be treated as such.

relevance matters...You don’t need to be always cutting-edge, but you do need to be of this moment. Utilize music that matters to teens. Tackle the issues that “are” rather than the issues that parents “would like to be.” *Dawson’s Creek* and *Buffy* gave us gays and lesbians in lead dramatic roles long before it was truly hip on adult TV (and actually, I’m still not sure that it is...). *Degrassi* continues to wow in this domain with a transgendered teen—and on a much more mainstreamed venue of Teen Nick than in its earlier The N years. The WB was rife with teens struggling with the

intensity of families FUBAR (but still normally FUBAR)—and we see that today in raw detail on everything from *Switched at Birth* to *Teen Wolf*. And yes—a big thing here—teens have sex. The WB wasn't afraid to show that and today I believe we get much more genuine stories dealing with teens and sex than we've ever had.

be bold with your premises...Folks scoffed at the vampire slayer; the teen detective (ok—UPN there with *Veronica Mars*, but that was so a WB show); the girl who chose college based on a boy crush. The teen landscape today is littered—in a good way—with absurd premises that have yielded killer stories about being a teen in the new Millenium: texting murderesses=the power (and perils) of friendship, wolf bites=the angst of masculinity and the terrors of not fitting in, wrong baby at the hospital=the all-too-real pains of determining where you “fit” in society (and your own family)...

think beyond teen...The best of the WB shows embraced adults—both in terms of attending to adult characters and in creating themes that transcend (without discounting) age. So today, the best of the shows on the “teen” channels do the same, providing a way for parents to watch TV with their kids, exposing teens to the realities of their parents' worlds and vice versa. WATCH BUNHEADS.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Is diversity better today than with the WB? Did the WB teach us enough about fandom—or is the amazing fan world of today's teen TV a testament to the current domain of TV more generally?