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# LIKE MOTHER LIKE DAUGHTER, LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

*The Spell of Youth on The O.C.*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay aims to shed light on the purposes served by parental figures in the television series *The O.C.* (2003-2007). For the teen-drama genre, Josh Schwartz's creation set a new trend of intergenerational narratives and shifted the perspectives among young and adult, and female and male characters. In addition to being functional to the plot and legitimizing the problems experienced by young viewers, parental figures serve at least two additional purposes on *The O.C.* First, I posit that adults act as positive and negative role models that allow Schwartz's show to function as a cautionary tale for its young viewers. Second, I propose that subplots revolving around parents allowed the showrunner to broaden the potential audience of the series, by targeting adults in addition to teen viewers. I finally suggest that, as most of the show's characters – parents and children alike – engage in youthful behavior, the series also seems to promote and perpetuate what sociologist Marcel Danesi has defined the "Forever Young Syndrome" – a kind of society where the generational gap is almost nonexistent and adults systematically behave, and inevitably consume, like teenagers.

**KEYWORDS:** Teen-Dramas, Pop Culture, *The O.C.*, Television Studies, Youth Culture.

On August 3, 2003, the day after the pilot episode of the television series *The O.C.* premiered in the United States, *The New York Times* ran a cover story, noting that the show broke with the conventions of the teen-drama genre by placing almost as great an emphasis on adult characters as it did on teenagers. Josh Schwartz's creation, the article reported, was shaped by "infidelity, corruption and parenting problems" (Tomashoff 2003). A week later, *Entertainment Weekly* echoed: "The kids of *The O.C.* not only do not live in a parentless universe – they are kids who suffer for living in a heavily parented one" (Seabree 2003).

Although the press immediately recognized this peculiarity, academic discussions about the cultural relevance of the short-lived but extremely popular television series

have tended to overlook the important precedent set by the active role taken up by parental characters, focusing instead on its contribution to place-making process (Fletcher 2012), the representation of gender roles (Meyer 2008), and its heavy employment of popular cultural and intertextual references (Albrecht 2008; Newman 2009; Fairchild 2011).<sup>1</sup> *The O.C.* has also received relatively little attention in comparison to other staples of the genre, such as *My So-Called Life*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Veronica Mars*, *Gilmore Girls*, and the *Degrassi* franchise. This comes as a surprise, considering that its overwhelming popularity alone, testified by eleven Teen Choice Awards and an audience of almost ten million viewers per episode in its first two seasons (Wyatt 2007), makes it a compelling object of investigation.<sup>2</sup>

Debuting at the turn of the millennium, *The O.C.* represents only the latest manifestation of an obsession with teen culture that had affected television since the previous decade. Valerie Wee (2010) has connected the proliferation of series aimed at young adults in the 1990s to the return of a young demographic – one that, in that period, held an annual buying power of over a hundred billion dollars, making it “the largest market to come along since their baby-boomer parents” (46-47). The first wave of teen-oriented television was characterized by the dichotomy between, on the one hand, music television – whose content was often deemed as politically incorrect – and on the other hand, by family friendly shows that ranged from teen-dramas such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Degrassi High* to teen-coms such as *Saved by The Bell* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. The year 1995 saw the birth of The WB, a broadcasting channel that adopted a strategy of narrowcasting, making the niche of teen demographic its main target. As Wee has pointed out, with shows such as *Buffy*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *Roswell*, *Charmed*, and *Felicity*, The WB adopted a range of characteristics borrowed from mainstream quality television,<sup>3</sup> that employed “glossy visual style, physically attractive ensemble cast, and [a more or less] honest exploration of the teenage experience” (49-50). The traits of quality television were also apparent in the employment of “ensemble casts in an hour-long

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to scholarly studies, a number of articles on the subject have also been published in popular magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, and *Variety*.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that, in the Fall term of 2012, the English Department at Duke University offered a “House Course” on the show, under Tom Ferraro’s supervision, is also indicative of its cultural legacy (“The OC’ College Course” 2012). It must also be noted that the success of *The O.C.* went beyond the United States, with the transnational character of the phenomenon testified by the numerous awards accrued in Australia, Europe, and South America.

<sup>3</sup> On “quality television” see also: Robert J. Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age*. Syracuse: University Press, 2008; Janet McCabe, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011; Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York: NYU Press, 2015.

dramatic format, narratives that replaced the familial milieu with a focus on the familial relationships that existed between friends and colleagues, a tendency towards liberal humanism, a propensity for self-reflexivity, and the adoption of cinematic techniques and aesthetics.” Finally, The WB introduced shows that typically indulged in “a degree of postmodern intertextuality, pastiche, genre hybridity, media mixing, and hyperconscious self-reflexivity” (52). As early as the year 2000, these characteristics would be appropriated by other networks, as evident in FOX series such as *Freaks and Geeks*, *Undeclared* and, indeed, *The O.C.*

*The O.C.* was hardly the first teen show to rely on a coalition of a mixed-age audience demographics.<sup>4</sup> Nostalgia has often played a significant role in making teen television appealing to older viewers. Matt Hills (2004) has noted how shows such as *Dawson’s Creek* featured hyperaware (i.e., overtly mature) teenager characters who spoke to different sectors of the audience at the same time (60). In reference to the same show, Clare Birchall (2004) has argued that it also owed its multi-generational appeal to its intertextual references to cultural artifacts from earlier eras (178), such as *90210*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *The Graduate*. However, whereas previous series attracted adults only indirectly, *The O.C.* differentiated itself from The WB tradition by casting complex adult characters in a central role, a move that offered older viewers opportunities for the development of parasocial relationships, or at the very least, of moments of self-identification.

Scholarship on teen television informs us that parental absence may serve a double narrative purpose in programs tailored for a young audience. On the one hand, it allows it to “enjoy the trials and tribulations of the teen experience without the teen characters or adolescent audience being impeded by a controlling or civilizing adult agenda.” On the other hand, it causes the young protagonists to “turn to one another and instill a sense of community based on their peer group and generation” (Feasey 2012, 158). However, this tendency, most evident in teen-oriented television from the 1990s, would be overturned by the turn of the century, first, with *Gilmore Girls*, a dramedy show (a subgenre that combines elements of comedy and drama) that focuses on mother-daughter relationships, thus appealing to an almost exclusively female audience, and then, with *The O.C.*, whose constant shift of perspectives among young and adult, and female and male characters has extended its appeal to a wider audience. These two shows

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<sup>4</sup> It is also of interest that the show attracted a diverse audience not only in terms of age, but also of gender. For example, in discussing her undergraduate students’ reaction to the show, Sue Turnbull (2008) has reported “it was the first time [she] had ever heard of groups of males gathering together to watch a teen TV melodrama.” Its primetime broadcast schedule also allowed for parents to join young viewers in their ritual (170). My personal experience as a teenager, in Italy first and in the United States later, is not dissimilar to what Turnbull describes, as I would spend hours on the phone discussing the show after every episode.

were forerunners of several popular teen-dramas (*The Secret Diary of the American Teen-Ager*, *90210*, and *Gossip Girl*, to name a few) that, in the following years, have made a selling point of this feature. The introduction of a category for “Best Parental Unit” at the Teen Choice Awards in 2005, testifies to the increasing representation of parents on teen-television.

In addition to being functional for the development of the plot and to legitimize the problems experienced by young viewers, parental figures on *The O.C.* serve at least two additional purposes. First, I posit that adults act as positive and negative role models that allow Schwartz’s show to function as a cautionary tale for its young viewers. Second, the addition of subplots revolving around parents unarguably allowed the creators of the show to broaden its potential audience, by targeting adults in addition to teen viewers. In the abovementioned *New York Times* article, Peter Gallagher (the actor playing Sandy Cohen) noted that when offered the role he immediately felt the show had the potential to move away from the tendency, typical of other staples of the genre, to make adult viewers feel alienated, by allowing both teenagers and adults to have their own experiences recognized in some way. It goes without saying that attracting an audience from a wider age demographic also makes advertising slots during airtime more valuable, and that, in turn, advertising revenue is a valuable parameter for assessing the market value of a television program. Drawing from this last point, my critical reading questions the tendency, certainly not initiated by Schwartz, but particularly evident in his work, of popular television series to portray (and address) a kind of contemporary society afflicted by what sociologist Marcel Danesi (2003) has called the “Forever Young Syndrome” – one where the generational gap is almost nonexistent and adults systematically behave, and inevitably consume, like teenagers.

Investigating the politics of teen television is particularly compelling because cultural texts aimed at a young audience have been historically thought to serve purposes of both entertainment as well as didacticism. Contributing to the ongoing debate about the agency (or lack thereof) of children and adolescents in producing the culture that they engage with, from a television studies perspective, Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (2004) have posited that

we cannot deny that there is significant input from dominant adult society in these programmes at most points of planning, production, distribution and marketing. These may be ‘our’ shows to teenagers, but ... the programmes are created by adults, arguably with a particular adult agenda. In the broadest sense this might be: to educate and inform while entertaining (something central to many strands of television in the Western world); to set certain agendas at this delicate time just prior to the onset of a more prominent citizenship; and/or to raise crucial issues (of adult choosing) in a ‘responsible manner’ that is entirely hegemonically negotiated. (3)

Indeed, on *The O.C.*, parental figures seem crucial for providing a moralizing message. The educational purposes of Schwartz’ work emerge from a sneak peek at its very

genealogy, as, in the DVD commentary for the pilot episode, the show's creator admits that the show "really is rooted a lot in fairy-tales" (Commentary to "Premiere" 2004), a genre historically tied to didacticism.<sup>5</sup>

Unarguably, we learn from a number of teen-dramas that preceded and followed *The O.C.* that didacticism in teen-oriented television is not contingent upon the presence of adults. However, the centrality of parental figures appears to strengthen the educational potential of the show, as *The O.C.*'s function as a cautionary tale is structured on multiple layers, offering behavioral models for the present (via young and adult characters for young viewers, and in the form of adult role models for adult viewers), identities to aspire to for the future, and formulaic behaviors to achieve them.

The most exemplary parental figure is the character of Sandy Cohen, a righteous pro bono Jewish lawyer, and an ideal and idealistic husband and father. Sandy is married to Kirsten "Kiki" Nichol, a sophisticated and wealthy WASP business-woman.<sup>6</sup> Successful in his private life and socially committed, Sandy symbolizes an affectionate and sympathetic father figure, whose quasi-biblical aptitude for goodness is noticeable since the pilot episode, when he becomes the legal guardian of his young client Ryan Atwood, an underprivileged kid from Chino who has been abandoned by his dysfunctional family. Tough and bad tempered, but good spirited, Ryan epitomizes the archetypal rebel teenager – or "Good Bad Boy," as proposed by Leslie Fiedler (1960) – a figure typical of American narratives from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (Kapan 1956, 80). The encounter between Ryan and Sandy represents what James Phelan would call an "instability," an unsettled matter that triggers the story (1989). Atwood's arrival in Newport is also the inciting incident that pushes Seth, the biological son of the couple, initially presented as unpopular and socially awkward, into his bildungsroman journey to maturation. At different times throughout the show, Sandy's guidance turns out to be crucial for the two teenagers' integration, self-realization, and pursuit of happiness. In line with the archetype of the teenage rebel

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<sup>5</sup> Fairy tales are also rooted in hope, desire, aspiration, and transformation – all which does casts the genre as an excellent intertext for *The O.C.* See also Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> It must be underlined that one of the most evident features of the show is the lack of racial diversity, a prominent issue of the genre, and part of the legacy of The WB model. From this perspective, as *The O.C.* unarguably participates in an investment in whiteness, and even though Ann Fletchall (2012) has argued that *The O.C.* portrays "a much less diverse, much wealthier, and decidedly more dramatic" Orange County (128), Schwartz' representation seems to be in line with the real and predominantly white demographics of Newport Beach. As reported by the popular website City-Data.com, in 2016, Blacks constituted merely 0.6% of Newport's population, and LatinX amounted to less than 8%. Source: "Newport Beach, CA - City-Data.com," accessed December 15, 2017 <http://www.city-data.com/city/Newport-Beach-California.html>.

proposed by Leerom Medovoi (2005), Ryan does not rebel against (Sandy's) paternal power, but rather against the social structures and villains – or “phonies,” as Holden Caulfield would have it – of Newport Beach. Ryan's quest is indeed paralleled by Sandy's clashes with Newport's elites and their conservatism. Kenneth Kidd (2011), drawing on Medovoi's study, has concluded that “the rebellion of the American teenager is enacted within as much as against American culture” (167). This is indeed the case for Ryan and Sandy, both of whom owe their inclusion in the community to their ties to Kirsten, whose father is Caleb Nichol, a wealthy real estate entrepreneur, referred to as “the Donald Trump of the West Coast” (“The Girlfriend” 2004). *Because* of their extremely privileged class status, and *despite* their frequent challenges to the norms of the community, the Cohens are able to maintain their position as a City Upon a Hill and their stature as “moral center of the universe” (“The Rainy Day Women” 2005) throughout the series.

Unlike most marriages in Newport, the union between Sandy and Kirsten does not enhance the bride's class status. As Bindig has noted, “it is Kirsten, not her husband, who holds most of the power in regard of capital [...]. Rather than simply relying on her father's legacy, she accumulates her own economic, cultural, and social capital through education and employment” (Bindig 2013, 59). In the overly deterministic and heteronormative (whereas same sex encounters are sanctioned negatively by the show and its fictional community) universe of *The O.C.*, Sandy and Kirsten thus represent a positive model that stands out as an exception among a number of fragmented, absent or misbehaving parental units displayed in the show.<sup>7</sup>

The Cohen's parental model is one based on mutual trust and respect. Because of his reliance on failure for personal growth, Sandy, often in conflict with Kirsten, refuses to employ means of coercion on several occasions throughout the show – such as when sixteen-year old Seth leaves Newport for Portland, or when, in the third season, Ryan drops out of high school to accept a job in the Alaskan fishing industry. The singularity of the Cohens' relationship with their sons is positively depicted in “The Mallpisode,” when Ryan, Seth, Marissa, and Summer get stranded in a shopping mall after hours. As the quartet informs their parents of their inability to return home for the night, the camera scrolls from right to left, juxtaposing the different parent-children interactions, clear indexes of the relationships' dynamics. Whereas Marissa and Summer fabricate excuses and deliver lies to their folks, Seth, apologetically, yet somewhat unabashedly, reports the truth to Kirsten. The Cohens' choice to accord their sons room for healthy failure, allows Ryan and Seth to escape what Barbara Hudson (1984) has deemed as “the

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<sup>7</sup> Commenting on his engagement with Schwartz' series, Doug Liman, one of the executive producers and director of the first two episodes, has emphasized the importance of the role of the Cohens in his decision to be involved with the project – “It's not just teenagers running around. Peter and Kelly [Rowan] have created a home on the show that I kind of wish I'd grown up in” (Porter 2004).

real problem of adolescence,” that “[teenagers] must demonstrate maturity and responsibility if they are to move out of this stigmatized status, and yet because adolescence is conceived as a time of irresponsibility and lack of maturity, they are given few opportunities to demonstrate these qualities which are essential for their admission as adults” (36). This points to yet another feature that differentiates *The O.C.* from a number of shows in the tradition of The WB, where teens are usually encouraged to avoid failure at all costs, and depicted as inevitably pathologizing, their problems by discussing them incessantly with each other. However, it must be noted that such a model of trial and error can only be enacted when there is a safety net in place that allows for the consequences of one’s mistake to cause relatively little harm, one that in the case of the Cohens is provided by their social and financial standing.

Sandy is not only dedicated to helping his kids navigate through life, but rather, he is cast as the savior of the entire community.<sup>8</sup> Both his moral standing and his profession as an attorney facilitate subplots that require his intervention, and cast him as a point of reference for all other characters. Schwartz himself has often acknowledged Sandy’s centrality to the narration. As he explains in the DVD commentaries, Sandy Cohen represents “the anchor” and “the rock” of the show (“Casting *The O.C.*” 2004; Commentary to “The Chrismukkah That Almost Wasn’t” 2005; “The Chrismukkah-huh?” 2006).<sup>9</sup> In the early days of the show, Schwartz admitted that “the core of the show is [the] father-son dynamic between Sandy and Ryan” (Pierce 2003). Thus, the former does not only serve as a positive role model for the viewers, but especially for the latter. In fact, while the show invites the audience to identify with Sandy, the trajectory of the show’s overarching narrative is driven by Ryan’s progressively *becoming* Sandy,<sup>10</sup> by learning his place in the world and becoming, as Huck Finn would have it, “civilized.” The closing scene of the show’s finale references and mimics the pivotal moment in the pilot episode when, following his release from the youth detention center, Sandy invites Ryan to return to Orange County with him. When, in “The End Is Not Near, It’s Here,” Ryan offers his help to an underprivileged kid, undoubtedly resembling his former self, the story – and the protagonist’s process of *becoming* – comes full circle.

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<sup>8</sup> The etymology of the character’s first name (from Alexander – defender of men; protector of mankind) is perhaps index of the role Sandy plays within the fictional world of the show. Sandy Cohen’s legacy as a role model has also been acknowledged in 2006, when Gallagher’s character has been celebrated at UC Berkeley (Sandy Cohen’s fictitious alma mater) by the “Sandy Cohen Public Defender Fellowship for Lawyers Who Dare to Dream,” which supported students working in the Orange County public defender’s office (“Actor Peter Gallagher Presents OC-inspired Public Defender Fellowship” 2005).

<sup>9</sup> In “The Chrismukkah-huh?,” Ryan and Taylor fall into a temporary coma, and dream of a disastrous (and hilarious) world where Sandy Cohen has lost his moral ground.

<sup>10</sup> In Schwartz’ words, the final scene of the show’s finale is exactly the moment when “Ryan becomes Sandy” (Commentary to “The End is not Near, It’s Here” 2007).

If the Cohens represent a positive example for the fictional community and viewers alike, a number of morally weak and reckless adult characters reinforce the function of the show as a cautionary tale. Among them, Julie Cooper – the mother of Marissa, one of the two main female teenage characters, together with Summer Roberts – is one of the characters with the most screen time. Melinda Clarke was initially cast as a recurring guest in the show. However, as authors and audience alike quickly became fascinated with her wicked character, Clarke was promoted to regular. Julie is depicted as an unscrupulous *arriviste* who, throughout the whole series, relies on wealthy men to support her and enhance her class status. According to Bindig (2013), Julie embodies the concept of erotic capital, combining “beauty, sex appeal, liveliness, a talent for dressing well, charm and social skills, and sexual competence. It is a mixture of physical and social attractiveness” (60). Born and raised in Riverside – a working-class suburb often compared to Chino, Ryan’s hometown – the show suggests she contracts a marriage of convenience with a successful, albeit immature and unreliable, financial planner (Jimmy), in order to engage in a privileged lifestyle and join the elitist social milieu of Newport Beach. Seemingly incorrigible, after divorcing Jimmy, Julie marries Kirsten’s father, Caleb Nichol, an affluent and greedy elder man, head of the Newport Group. Despite the authority she is able to gain by means of her marriages, Julie’s hypersexuality and her promiscuity often cast her as the butt of the joke within the community. She has over half a dozen partners during the series, including Ryan’s, Summer’s and Kirsten’s fathers and Marissa’s ex-boyfriend, Luke, in blunt plot twists reminiscent of the worst soap operas, but also of the seduction novels of early American literature, such as Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1794) or Hanna Webster Foster’s *The Croquettes* (1797).

Rebecca Feasey (2012) has raised the question of how motherhood is represented in television shows for adolescents. Feasey claims that the recent trend to assign parents and guardians more central roles in contemporary popular teen dramas has given way to the emergence of the trope of absent and ineffectual mothers, or to the representation of mothers as the “delinquent of the [parental] pair” (155). Feasey has based her argument on a number of teen-dramas from the 1990s onwards<sup>11</sup> and has concluded that, regardless of whether teenagers are abandoned by their mothers, or become orphans, removing the mother figure from the picture has little to do with the plot – in fact many of those shows “make it clear that fathers and male guardians are to be respected because they, and they alone, provide structure, guidance and authority for those teens under their care.” This appears to be particularly true of *90210*, a show that she scrutinizes in

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<sup>11</sup> Such as *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000), *Heartbreak High* (1994-99), *Party of Five* (1994-2000), *Charmed* (1998-2006), *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003), *Popular* (1999-2001), *Roswell High* (1999-2002), *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001-), *Smallville* (2001-11), *The O.C.* (2003–07), *Glee* (2009-15), and *Hellcats* (2010).



detail and which tends to depict mothers as particularly “weak and irresponsible – be it socially, sexually or financially” (Feasey 2012, 155).

Julie Cooper epitomizes and perpetuates a number of sexist stereotypes associated with women, and her character unarguably fits the picture drawn by Feasey, and, to a lesser extent, so do some other adult female characters (such as Summer’s perpetually absent mother, and Veronica Townsend who is constantly depicted as an extremely manipulative, selfish and uptight parent). However, in *The O.C* male figures such as Caleb Nichol, Jimmy Cooper, and Frank Atwood, are not represented as ideal fathers and husbands, but rather as equally (if not more) immature, irresponsible, selfish, and wicked. Indeed, it is often male misbehavior that leads to the collapse of the family. Rather timidly, Feasey (2012) concedes the possibility of a positive reading for these representations of models of motherhood. She does so by hinting that the shows’ authors might be picking up on second wave feminist ideology, which attempted to “denaturalize motherhood and theorize it as historically, culturally and socially constructed.” However, this reading clashes with “those images of monstrous motherhood that are being presented on the small screen,” for which she does not go beyond expressing her “shock” (158). Possible explanations for such troubled representations of female characters in teen-dramas range from factors as obvious as the show-business’s gender bias (most of the shows Feasey mentions were created and run by men) to the fact that, as I have been arguing in this essay, the genre tends to cast itself as a form of cautionary tale for young viewers, with the uprising and the downward spirals of adult characters (female and male alike) acting as warnings for the audience.

In addition, a feminist reading of *The O.C.* should also take into consideration how the show positively challenges the trope of the happy housewife myth, and shuffles gender roles in a number of ways – a characteristic evident in the most enduring relationships of the series, the ones between Sandy and Kirsten Cohen, and between Seth and Summer. Sandy’s greatest merit is to subvert the traditional family where “fathers are involved habitually in family problem-solving and family discipline, and mothers are more often associated with issues of domesticity and nurturance” (Douglas 2011, 120). Turnbull (2008) has proposed a compelling comparison between the narrative structure and the tropes of the show and the movie *Rebel without a Cause*, whose “events, characters, iconography, and themes” were, according to her reading, “referenced and re-worked” by Schwartz (171, 177-78). However, in addition to the examples she has proposed, I would like to point out that *The O.C.* also mocks and subverts the notorious “emasculated dad” trope from Nicholas Ray’s classic 1955 movie. Whereas an apron-wearing father wreaks havoc in young Jimmy Stark’s life, Schwartz, by presenting Sandy’s domesticity – illustrated, among other things, by his skills in the kitchen – as exemplary, and the Cohens as the only successful household, the show seems to suggest that, in the

new millennium, the very survival of the family relies on the subversion of constructed gender roles.

Although, as Schwartz reportedly admitted, *The O.C.* is a show that presents “central teen characters whose stories could not be told without the adults’ stories” (Tomashoff 2004), in turn, the youngsters of Newport Beach also play crucial roles in the complex development of subplots that revolve around adult characters. For example, Ryan and Seth play a central role in saving Sandy and Kirsten’s marriage, by talking the latter into getting help when she slips into alcohol addiction, or by prompting Sandy to give up his role as the head of the Newport Group when he lets himself (and his ego) prioritize work over family. Youths thus act as catalysts for action, their elders often confronting each other, or engaging in conversations about their issues, solely as a consequence of the adolescents’ actions. Therefore, in the series, the fate of teenagers and adults is tightly entangled and contributes to the creation of a narrative that sees the generational gap progressively blurred by presenting young characters who feel responsible to nurture their parents instead of the other way around.<sup>12</sup>

Now, before diving into the last section of this essay, where I will be looking at the way the show’s possessive investment in teen culture produces a blur of intergenerational boundaries, I would like to emphasize once again how, as Davis and Dickinson (2004) have noted, television programs “have to deal with the fact that they are mainly commercial ventures, struggling to make money [...] and, in this sense, they have to consider how to pander to the customers” (3). Since the 1950s, the television medium and consumer industries, by “interact[ing] with and reinforc[ing] one another in efforts to woo the lucrative youth market” (Osgerby 2004, 73), actively participated in the social construction of adolescence. Thus, the construction of a teen demographic market in the late 1990s – in response to the coming of age of the so called “Generation Y” – that resulted in the launch and the overwhelming success of *The WB*, is hardly surprising.

During its first three seasons, *The O.C.* was certainly a successful commercial venture, as proved by its “top-rated” status for advertisers (Associated Press 2007), and by the great number of extra-textual manifestations and spin-off items through which the makers of the series have been able to capitalize on its brand.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, its

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<sup>12</sup> This tendency would be later taken to an extreme, with more recent series, such as *Gossip Girl* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, that insist on regularly presenting kids scheming in order to control their parents’ romantic lives.

<sup>13</sup> Among these, Fox licensed the release of eight novelizations – the marginal role played by adult characters in these texts, aimed solely at a young readership, seems to confirm how their marked presence in the television series reflects the intentions of the authors to appeal to a broader audience, rather than just presenting likeable adult characters for the pleasure of young viewers. The publication of Alan

commercial value was certainly heightened by the way the show reinforces the idea that consumer culture is inescapable during adolescence, an effect achieved by bombarding the audience with visual and verbal references to brands and consumer products – such as clothes, cars, videogames, technology, comic books – reflecting the personalities of the characters. Bindig (2013) has noted that

even when not focusing on a specific brand, *The O.C.* presented an upscale luxury lifestyle consisting of elite goods and services like champagne, lingerie, high-thread-counts sheets, silver place settings, jewelry, spa treatment, cosmetic surgery, yogalates, and cardio barre, cosmetics, caviar, floral arrangements, shopping, golfing, surfing, and tanning. (98)

Although those references are often employed to mock the lifestyle of Newport's rich and famous, its setting certainly reinforces the strong connections of the show with material and consumer culture. As Fletchall (2012) has reported, Orange County is

home to the largest grossing shopping mall in the country (South Coast Plaza), the world's largest Mercedes-Benz dealer, the most expensive auto dealership ever built (Newport Lexus), the second largest BMW dealership in the U.S., the most purchasers of Lamborghinis in America and the second-most of Aston-Martins [...] Its residents hold among the most purchasing power in the nation [...]. In the 2008 U.S. Census Orange County housing values ranked [among the] priciest in the nation, with Newport Beach leading the county. (19)

In 2004, underlining the importance of cultural artifacts in place-making, *The New York Times* reported that television series such as *The O.C.* and *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* have contributed to the creation of a fascination with Orange County that “taps the need Americans seem to have to create a bubble in which playful adolescent fantasies can act themselves out in the sun, removed from any real-world complications like war, unemployment or split ends” (Williams 2004). Furthermore, it must be noted that, by presenting a depiction of “high school life not as it was experienced [by most], but rather how teenagers dreamed it ought to be” (Bellafante 2007) most television series for adolescents do not merely “sell” consumer products to their audiences, but a complete lifestyle, and they perpetuate – both domestically and transnationally – an extremely idealized image of the American teenager experience. This is especially true when they are set in hyper-privileged milieus such as Beverly Hills (*Beverly Hills, 90210*), Newport Beach (*The O.C.*), and Manhattan's Upper East Side (*Gossip Girl*).

*The O.C.* thus allows for both temporal and spatial self-projection. If the former – achieved through the presence of adult characters – prompts the young audience to ask

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Sepinwall's *Stop Being a Hater and Learn to Love the OC* – a popular unofficial guide to the show that specifically targets adult viewers, speaks alone of the success of Schwartz' marketing strategy. Sepinwall's opening line reads “Hi, my name is Alan, and I'm an O.C.-aholic. I'm thirty years old, with a wife, a baby, and a little house in the suburbs” (Sepinwall 2004, 2).

itself “Who do I want to be when I grow up?” the latter invites the viewer to imagine themselves living in an affluent, white-washed, and forever-young Orange County.

At this point, it is worth noting that, by the 1990s, the notion of “teenager” had less to do with biological age and increasingly more with lifestyle and shared cultural taste, and it had come to represent “a range of idealized qualities such as vitality, excitement, vigor, promise, and cutting-edge interests.” As Wee’s (2010) analysis suggests:

in the youth-obsessed culture of American society in the 20th and 21st century, it is no longer how young you are, but how young you *think* you are, or *choose* to be, that matters. [...] Consequently, in skewing towards a teen demographic, authors of teen TV shows were not restricting themselves to a demographic defined by actual age. Rather, it was aligning with a broader market that could relate to and embrace a teen lifestyle and, more importantly for advertiser interests, its products. (47-48 [emphasis in original])

If, as previously mentioned, The WB’s primetime series attracted an adult audience primarily by appealing to the features of quality television, to young characters likable by both adults and teenagers, and by evoking nostalgia through intertextual references, *The O.C.* further universalized its appeal by bringing adult characters to the core of the action. I cannot help but partially attribute this phenomenon to the fact that the show portrays a kind of contemporary American society where the generational gap is almost nonexistent. *The O.C.* largely differs from classics of the genre where the ideology of the television father was in outright opposition with that of his offspring, inviting the audience to side with one of the parties involved.<sup>14</sup> In fact, as the great majority of Schwartz’s characters engage in youthful behavior in one way or another, they appear to be affected by what Danesi (2003) has defined as the “Forever Young Syndrome,” manifesting itself in the form of “excessive worship of adolescence itself and its social empowerment by adult institutions.” Its symptoms include “an unprecedented increase in the sales of cosmetics and in the use of plastic surgery by males and females of all ages and all social classes,” “the widespread tendency of more and more adults to maintain their previous adolescent lifestyles throughout their lives, albeit unconsciously,” and “the general tendency for individuals of all ages to adopt in some form the fashion and lifestyles that emanate from the adolescent realm” (22).

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<sup>14</sup> The familiar quarrels often revolved around the realms of politics, civil rights, or warfare. A good example is represented by *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), another staple of teenage television. The father, a Korean War veteran, strongly supports American intervention in Vietnam, in diametrical opposition with his free-spirited, hippie daughter (Karen). The fact that the show aired during the First Gulf War, made the endorsement of one of the characters on the part of the viewership even more compelling.

Teenage culture constitutes thus the dominant cultural paradigm of the entire show, for reasons that go beyond the amusing of its audience or the employment of nostalgia as a narrative device. Rather, it functions as what Medovoi (2005) would define “a politically potent discursive formation” aimed at creating a post-Fordist teenage culture “identified almost exclusively with consumption” (34-36). In short, the reality depicted on *The O.C.* is one where being “forever young”<sup>15</sup> represents a clever opportunity for product placement. Indeed, although Medovoi’s analysis is centered mainly on the formation of a market segment aimed at youth consumption during the 1950s, teenage culture has ever since demonstrated a long-lasting impact on the consumer market. Modern television shows, such as *The O.C.*, have successfully contributed to shifting teenage culture’s features and effects to the adult world, by creating cultural products ready to be sold to different social groups and multiple segments of the market. Finally, Danesi has pointed out that

since teen tastes change virtually overnight, instant obsolescence can be built into the creation, marking and promotion of the new [...] trends. Teen tastes have become the tastes of all because the economic system in which we now live requires this to be so, and it has thus joined forces with the media-entertainment oligarchy to promote its forever-young philosophy on a daily basis: youth sells. (Danesi 2003, ix)

The volatility of their tastes and their susceptibility to media manipulation thus make teenagers a virtually perfect target. However, high-schoolers, unlike adults, do not typically have access to the primary currency in a capitalist society: a steady income required to make impulsive purchases on a regular basis. In this scenario, shows such as *The O.C.* and *Gilmore Girls* have left a legacy that can be framed as part of a trend that climaxed in the 2000s with a number of series for which the centrality of adults in the plot has represented a successful marketing strategy, a trend that has blurred the lines between the behavior expected of teenagers and their parental figures, instilling and legitimizing in the latter the needs of the former.

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<sup>15</sup> A cover version of the popular song by the same name, originally played by the German band Alphaville, is indeed played recurrently throughout the series and is part of its official soundtrack.

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