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“THEY CAVORT, YOU DECIDE”:
TRANSGENERICISM, QUEERNESS, AND FAN INTERPRETATION IN TEEN TV

“Two lives, forever linked by fate. Bound by a destiny neither can escape.” So proclaimed the WB’s promotional spot for *Smallville*’s third season. While this phrasing might bring to mind iconic romantic figures such as Romeo and Juliet, the two lives in question belong instead to the teenaged Clark Kent, Superman to be, and Lex Luthor, his eventual archnemesis. *Smallville* maps the growing pains of Clark and Lex against epic fantastic narratives of victims and saviors, heroes and villains. FOX’s teen melodrama, *The OC*, similarly traces the friendship between two young men with different backgrounds and life paths. Wealthy but geeky Seth and James Dean style rebel Ryan become unlikely friends when Seth’s family adopts Ryan into the fold. Thus, both *The OC* and *Smallville* feature friendships between men with strikingly different backgrounds and assumed futures, and, perhaps not surprisingly, both shows have active fandoms who read the characters’ investment in one another as more than just friendship. However, the generic structures of the two programs differ significantly, and these differences shape fan discourse on potential queer meanings. This essay will chart the similarities and differences between the generically inflected queer readings elicited by *Smallville*’s epic teen fantasy and *The OC*’s realist teen melodrama.

“The hug at the end? Ryan’s longing gaze at cute sleeping Seth? The romantic sailboat? Oh yeah they totally want each other.”

Fan comments such as the above exemplify the starting trajectory of much of slash fan discussion, as fans consider what they see as textual evidence of a program’s queer meanings (“the hug at the end, Ryan’s longing gaze at cute, sleeping Seth”) and then introduce their queer interpretations (in this case, that Seth and Ryan “clearly want each other”). Similarly, the title of the discussion thread at which this quote was shared, “They Cavort, You Decide,” points to two dimensions of fan engagement, with “they cavort” referring to what fans see in the televisual text, and “you decide” suggesting viewer analysis. However, the “you decide” portion of this equation is open ended to say the least. Fans “decide” not only whether two characters are sexually and/or romantically involved, but also whether such meanings are simply products of their own interpretations or are instead present in the text. Fans also address
the broader significance of their queer readings, reflecting on questions familiar to us as media scholars, as they consider the ramifications of queer meanings for the television programs being read queerly, the audiences engaging with them, and the popular cultural contexts within which these meanings are situated.

Building on Alexander Doty’s consideration of the ways queer meanings function in our mainstream media experience, this essay examines queer discourses in both The OC and Smallville, first looking closely at the texts of the programs themselves to consider what the fans might see as “cavorting,” and then addressing the fan interpretations surrounding these queer meanings. In the process, I am less concerned with whether queer meanings are best located within the text itself or in reader interpretation, or with whether one of these programs is more “queer” than the other, although I will argue that queer meanings function differently in the two programs because of differences in generic composition. My overarching goal is to explore how fans understand their own engagement and to consider what we, as scholars of media reception, might learn about media spectatorship from the fan perspective. The multilayeredness of these programs, together with the complexity of fannish responses, offer us both an interpretative model and a way to understand how viewers engage with mainstream media texts.

Not all subtexts are created equal: Comparing “Smallville” and “The OC”

Smallville is one of a recent influx of teen fantasy programs that mix generic discourses in ways that challenge traditional understandings of genre as stable category. Recent trends in genre theory have expanded discussions of genre from categories of media texts to textual and extratextual discourses moving both through and beyond media texts. These approaches inform my choice to look at transgenerically inflected discourses of queerness not only in the television texts themselves but also in the metatext of fan interpretation. I use the term transgeneric to describe the way in which television programs such as Smallville mix generic discourses in text and metatext to blur generic divisions. We can most usefully apply the term transgenericism to generically mixed media texts which cannot be easily separated into their component generic parts. Unlike traditional understandings of genre combination as a hybrid joining of clearly separate generic pieces, my use of tranngenericism implies the particular way in which television programs such as Smallville mesh generic discourse, with each generic element shedding light on its new partner(s) so that their specific synthesis contributes to the overall meaning, effect, and affect of the program.

While Smallville is an exemplary instance of a specific teen fantasy transgeneric formation, we can also consider The OC to be transgeneric, in the loosest sense at least. Although The OC does not incorporate unexpected elements like fantasy, the teen genre itself draws on an amorphous set of elements often associated with other generic discourses such as comedy, romance, and melodrama. While Smallville merges markedly divergent generic discourses, superimposing teen generic elements onto the apocalyptic, superheroic, and fantastic, The OC thus meshes together more commonly associated generic elements. These differences between The OC’s and Smallville’s tranngenericism directly affect the queer meanings elicited by the text, allowing Smallville to pose queerness metaphorically, while The OC offers the possibility of addressing sexual identity overtly as a social issue.

“Maybe I am a freak.”

These transgeneric differences shape the range of queer representations in both shows, as Smallville’s fantastic dimension facilitates a metaphoric articulation of queerness which can have no place within The OC. To start with the most obvious: Smallville slash fans share their readings of Lex Luthor as a hard-to-miss queer figure in various online venues such as fanforum, livejournal, and slash fan fiction archives. While the Smallville text periodically reasserts Lex’s heterosexuality, viewers point to multiple signs linking Lex with otherness—his baldness, his wardrobe, his penchant for the color purple, and rumors of his wild urban past. In addition, while Smallville’s characterization of
Lex draws on traditional, non-fantastic cinematic representations of queerness, Smallville also hyperbolizes Lex’s queerness through fantasy. We learn that Lex has been transformed by the meteor shower which brought Clark to earth; thus his difference is dually signified through his meteor induced baldness as well as his culturally marked wardrobe. Furthermore, Smallville presents Lex as acutely aware of his own difference. Toward the end of Smallville’s third season, Lex begins to wonder whether he is a meteor mutant, a recurring metaphor for otherness throughout the program. He voices this concern to Clark as he wonders, “Maybe I am a freak.” Smallville slash fandom draws on all of these elements, including Lex’s self-proclaimed “freakishness,” to embrace Lex as an overtly queer figure.

If Lex is the most evident queer figure in Smallville, he is certainly not the only one. Smallville’s overall premise centers on Clark, as he faces the normal trials of teenage life. Clark must deal not only with his parents, friends, popularity, and romance, but also with his newly-discovered alien identity. As a confused and marginalized alien teen, Clark’s plight is read by many slash fans as a metaphor for gay teen experience. A commonly retold Smallville slash fanfiction narrative depicts Clark coming out to Lex as both gay and an alien in the same conversation, thus rendering explicit this metaphoric representation of alienation as queerness, framed within sympathetic adolescent coming-of-age angst. This metaphor extends even further, to Smallville’s many “freaks of the week,” as each episode features young teens discovering strange, meteor induced powers which they must hide from their friends, family, and community.

Thus Smallville evokes queer meanings on multiple levels, coding at least one of its central characters through traditional cinematic and cultural representations of queerness while presenting others metaphorically through its transgeneric intermeshing of teen and fantasy.
In addition, many viewers recognize *Smallville*’s central focus on a same-sex attachment (between Clark and Lex) as more romantic than homosocial. Indeed, *Smallville*’s transgeneric merger of superheroic narratives with teen thematics seems to elevate the representation of passionate emotion between two men to what we could call the homoromantic. Where the homoerotic extends from the homosocial into the realm of hinted and suppressed sexuality, the homoromantic combines gendered generic discourses of male heroism with romantic structures, so that epic relationships between two males become readable as romantically charged.\(^5\) For example, in the pilot episode, Clark saves Lex from drowning to the romantic swell of extradiegetic music. *Smallville* producers Al Gough and Miles Millar describe this moment as Clark and Lex’s “meet violent,” a twist on the romantic comedy’s “meet cute” (and, perhaps not so incidentally, they also describe the depiction of Clark performing CPR on Lex as “kissing.”)\(^6\) With such romantic generic terminology being used by the program’s producers to describe Clark and Lex’s relationship, perhaps it is not surprising that many fans read the friendship between Clark and Lex as romance. And indeed, Clark and Lex’s “meet violent” has become important to *Smallville* slash fans invested in the romantic, fated aspects of Clark and Lex’s relationship; fan videos, art, and fiction draw repeatedly on the iconography of this moment to depict the epic Clark/Lex romance.

*Smallville*’s articulation of the homoromantic is further enhanced by Clark Kent and Lex Luthor’s status within the American imagination as superhero and supervillain, figures laden heavily with decades worth of narratives and meanings across media.\(^7\) Advertising material for *Smallville* often emphasizes the epic dimensions of their fated relationship, as in the promotional spot with which this essay opened. For slash viewers at least, it is not a far reach from such epic language to a sense of homoromanticism as well as homoeroticism.\(^8\)

**“Go With What Works”**

In contrast to *Smallville*’s teen fantasy hyperbole, *The OC*’s realist teen melodrama intertwines issues of class, family, high school social hierarchies, romance, and sexual identity. Thus, *The OC* walks a different line than *Smallville* in terms of queer meanings; where *Smallville*’s teen fantasy trangenericism enables evocative but indirect representations of queerness as fantastic otherness, *The OC* must play with the possibilities of the literal rather than the metaphoric.

Just as *Smallville* has obvious connections to *Superman*, *The OC* has a similar, if not as direct relationship to an earlier media text which itself has a history of being read queerly: *Rebel Without a Cause* posits an emotional and erotic triangle in the relationships between Plato, Jim, and Judy, a dynamic strongly echoed in *The OC*’s main characters, Seth, Ryan, and Marissa. Writers such as Vito Russo, Richard Dyer, and others have explored the homoerotic subtext in *Rebel*, specifically looking at Plato as a character who could be read as gay and at the friendship between Plato and Jim as potentially homoerotic.\(^9\) In *The OC*’s premiere episode, some fans recognized what they saw as direct references to *Rebel*, and understood Seth and Ryan’s friendship in relation to this popularized queer interpretation of *Rebel*, with comments such as “Seth is totally the Sal Mineo to Ryan’s James Dean. Mmm, sweet HoYay!” (“HoYay” being a fan term celebrating homoerotic subtext, short for “Homoeroticism, Yay!”).

Thus, many viewers recognized Seth, like Lex, as a queer figure from the first episode of *The OC* onward. Such a reading was offered verbally by the script itself, as Marissa’s boyfriend, Luke, the seeming poster boy for heteronormativity, actually calls Seth queer more than once. To further support this interpretation, Seth doesn’t fully disagree with Luke. Rather, like Lex, Seth acknowledges and even embraces his perceived difference from the mainstream, cutting off his own protest of Luke’s remark with the quip: “On second thought, go with what works.” Fans understood this absence of denial as evidence of the queer meaning in *The OC*; as one viewer put it “And when Luke called him queer, he just said ‘Yeah, well at least I don’t shave my chest!’ The Yeah being the stand out word!” Fans thus pointed to Seth’s lack of denial as proof that their reading of Seth as queer was “true,” or, at the least, relevant.
However, The OC also establishes a heteroromantic interest for Seth in the pilot episode, as he proclaims to Ryan his romantic longing for Marissa's bitchy best friend, Summer, who doesn’t even know his name. Later episodes frame Seth even more solidly within narratives of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, as, inexplicably, Seth transforms from friendless outcast to quirkily desirable boyfriend material. Instead of struggling with his sexual orientation, as slash fans might have hoped, Seth faces the difficult choice between two girls—blonde, independent Anna and sarcastic brunette Summer—finally settling on Summer as his original romantic ideal. Instead of struggling with his sexual orientation, as slash fans might have hoped, Seth faces the difficult choice between two girls—blonde, independent Anna and sarcastic brunette Summer—finally settling on Summer as his original romantic ideal. But the conclusion of season one reasserts Seth’s sexual ambiguity, as he leaves not only Summer but all of California upon discovering that Ryan has moved out of Seth’s home. The first season’s conclusion places Seth and Ryan’s relationship in the narrative’s foreground, with the final image depicting Seth sailing off from shore in romantic isolation. The second season’s opening bookends this romantic moment, as Seth and Ryan run to each other in a cross cutting formulation seemingly more fitted for the representation of reuniting lovers. Thus, Seth and Ryan’s relationship extends into the realm of the homoromantic not by way of epic fantastic battles but rather through romantic or melodramatic soap opera tropes. But such moments of the homoromantic punctuate rather than characterize The OC’s teen melodramatic realism, whereas Smallville’s fantasy-framed homoromanticism structures its larger narrative.

Queer vs. Freak

Despite their generic difference, both Smallville and The OC have repeatedly portrayed what many fans recognize as slash fantasies or clichés; however the way these clichés play out reveals the ramifications of the generic differences between the two shows. Smallville is much more ambivalent in its portrayal of Lex’s queerness, rendering Lex as an extremely sympathetic figure and yet at the same time punishing him with a disproportionate level of violence. In the season three Smallville episode “Shattered,” Lex turns to Clark for help, certain that his father is trying to commit him to a mental institution. When it is revealed that Lex may indeed be crazy, with a history of psychosis perhaps due to the accidental murder of his baby brother, Clark finds Lex singing a lullaby and clutching a “baby” which is in truth a flannel blanket. The resulting vision is a strikingly queer one, undermining expectations of masculinity, positing Lex as maternal figure, and casting the three of them (Clark, Lex, and flannel baby) as tragic nuclear family. In the next episode, “Asylum,” Clark goes against the explicit wishes of his parents and friends when he decides to break Lex out of the asylum. Here, from the slash fan viewpoint, we have the homoromantic in all its unabashed glory, as Clark defies his parents, choosing his love for Lex over his love for his family. “Asylum,” however, also suggests a more schizophrenic relationship to the queer in Smallville, exacting violent punishment on the frequently beaten Lex through the excruciating depiction of electroshock therapy, and yet resurrecting him at episode end in all his ethereally strong, androgynous beauty.

The first season episode of The OC, “Countdown,” also gestures towards a slash fan cliché when various plot twists lead to Seth and Ryan finding themselves locked together in the pool house on New Year’s Eve as the minutes tick down to 2004. Fans recognized the possibilities of this scenario, as well as the gap between what played out on screen and what would have been likely to occur in the slash fan imagination. Trapped together in close quarters, Seth and Ryan appear to be incredibly bored, lying on the floor several feet apart, blowing balloons and wishing desperately that they could get out; whereas, if this were a slash story, they would certainly not be bored and it would not be balloons they were blowing. Without the transgenericism so crucial to the above Smallville examples, only the framework of the slash cliché exists, empty of content. When Seth informs Ryan that how one spends midnight of New Year’s Eve determines the course of the next year, Ryan must make a mad (slow motion) dash to the awaiting Marissa, leaving Seth to explore first (and perhaps second) base with Anna, in this way successfully warding off the onset of explicit queerness for another year. With the threat of an undeniably queer future looming on the horizon, this episode seems
to clamp down excessively, almost to the point of parody, on the possibility of The OC’s queer subtext turning overt.

Thus, while The OC initially appeared inclined to speak of queerness directly, as the first season progressed, fans perceived a significant divergence between their interpretation of Seth and Ryan’s relationship and what they saw in the overt narrative of the text. Direct speaking about Seth’s queerness transformed into what slash fans recognized as not-quite-buried in-jokes. In a scene featuring another fan-favored slash pairing, Luke and Ryan, Ryan inquires “What happened here?” to which Luke replies, “They slashed it.” The following image reveals a slashed tire on Luke’s truck, but slash fans read this dialogue as a reference to their own viewing engagement. This moment of wordplay would almost without a doubt have slipped by a viewer not familiar with the term slash, but, to viewers invested in slash as a self-conscious reading position, this scene spoke loud and clear as an acknowledgment of their own act of viewer interpretation, whether or not such a meaning was at all intentional at any level of production.¹⁰

Smallville and The OC thus both exhibit ambivalence towards their possible queer meanings, but do so in different ways. The OC reclaims Seth for heterosexuality (at least superficially), deflecting queer meanings into wordplay and hidden jokes. In contrast, Lex appears irrecuperable, remaining consistently, sympathetically queer. But such consistency has repercussions, for as irrecuperable “freak,” Lex is punished in “Asylum” with a level of violence which would never be incorporated into The OC. Smallville’s epic rendition of queerness is facilitated by its superheroic framework, which has ample room for the sympathetic image of an insane supervillain as tragic figure, and for a recurring focus on a passionate relationship between two young men with linked destinies. The OC’s negotiation with its possible queer meanings plays out differently; while it has the potential to speak literally rather than metaphorically, the program more often retracts to wordplay or to the subtle mocking of heteroromantic generic clichés. This dynamic is strikingly different from the way Smallville consistently explores issues of alienation, freaks, and normality, issues which may hold queer meaning for some members of the audience but which are available, at least thematically, to all.

Smallville speaks loudly through metaphor. Clark and Lex are linked together precisely because of their joint status as “freak.” If we engage either with Clark’s alienness or with Lex’s alienation, then we are engaging with the queer in Smallville. The OC may actually say “queer,” but it does so only off-handedly and then moves on, while Smallville makes “freak” its central thematic. Thus, Smallville’s incorporation of fantasy places queerness front and center, while The OC’s queerness stays, for the most part, on the sidelines.¹¹

Fan Discourse: Intentionality and Significance

To review, despite their transgeneric differences, both The OC and Smallville depict two young
men who are best friends, and, for both shows, viewers read these relationships as more than just friendship. Both shows also offer characters who are claimed by their respective fandoms as overtly queer figures, but due to significant generic differences, most crucially Smallville’s use of the fantastic to depict metaphoric queerness, the possible queer meanings play out differently in the two shows. As Smallville’s epic/fantastic context opens up spaces for a visceral, sympathetic engagement with queer meanings, The OC’s realist teen melodrama limits its representation of queer teen experience. In turn, these differences affect the ways in which fans speak about the queer meanings they perceive in the two programs.

Fans posit various explanations for the existence of queer subtexts in Smallville and The OC. They suggest that writers, producers, directors, and/or actors may purposefully develop and integrate queer visions into the text. Viewers often argue that queer meanings emerge from an auteurist vision on the part of producers or writers, thus casting the entire program as subversive in the broader media arena. For example, many viewers of The OC suggest that Seth and Ryan’s relationship seems so obvious that the writers must be conscious of the possible queer meaning in the script:

Do you think the writers realize how gay this show is? I mean, they must know, but seriously. The HoYay was dancing around with a big red flashing neon sign that read “Seth loves Ryan.” My 12-year-old cousin noticed.

Arguing that The OC’s queerness is so clear that the writers must have put it there on purpose, this comment ascribes the “HoYay” in The OC to writer intentionality. Just as often, however, fans attribute queer meanings to actors’ performance choices. They suggest that actors, like slash viewers, see the possibilities of a queer reading and then imbue their performance with that vision.
During the opening weeks of *The OC*, many viewers speculated that the male leads were quite aware of the “slashiness” of their performances. Slash viewers thus perceive themselves as recognizing and unpacking meanings intended by the performers if not by the show’s producers, writers, and directors. This point of view aligns slash fans with performers, casting both as transgressive interpreters and performers in the face of a restrictive industry.

An online fan essay entitled “The Gayness of *Smallville*” outlines various factors possibly contributing to *Smallville*’s “gayness,” with hypotheses traversing varying levels of production and intent—from chemistry between actors to intentional performance strategies to direction and editing choices. This essay argues that all of these elements must exist in tandem in order for *Smallville*’s “gayness” to be as overt as it is:

> MR is a wonderful actor … If someone told [him] to be a lot less gay, he could be. But no one is … It’s fairly easy for editors not to cut an exchange of gazes to last tens of seconds. Even if the actors gaze longingly at one another, the editor is under no obligation to use that footage. But they do.

This fairly representative analysis traces the locations and types of possible intentionality—producer, actor or writer, subconscious or conscious. But to what ends? For what purpose? What difference does it make to fans if the subtext is intentional or not?

The answer to these questions returns us again to the transgeneric differences between the two programs. For *The OC*, fan discussions of intentionality at first revolved around the possibility, offered by *The OC*’s melodramatic teen realism, that the queer subtext might become text. Given the perceived level of obviousness of the queer subtext in early episodes, fans speculated that they were reading intended clues pointing to the ultimate direction of the plot; that is, that the story might be actually headed toward a romance between Seth and Ryan, or, at the very least, that Seth would be revealed to be bisexual, and interested in Ryan. Some viewers voiced this possibility as an opportunity for *The OC* to break new ground. One fan wrote:

> Maybe it’s just the HoYay talking, but I actually legitimately think that it would be a braver and more interesting direction for the show to go in if both Seth and Marissa were in love with Ryan.

Others contextualized this possible storyline within the media’s new fixation on queer subjects, arguing that it would indeed be possible for Seth to turn out to be gay, and that such a move could be understood as FOX “cashing in” on the new public interest in all things queer:

> The writers on this show are clearly fans of the HoYay! Between *The OC*, *Boy Meets Boy*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Tuesday is without a doubt the gayest night of the week.
This quote posits the queer subtext in *The OC* as an intentional commercial decision. However, in response, another fan pointed to the restrictions of commercial television to argue that the queer subtext in *The OC* would probably not be made overt.

I totally agree with you ... But I don’t see anything so funky happening, either...not while Chili’s paying the bills.

These analyses reveal fan awareness of the industrial context for *The OC*’s production. They also indicate fan consideration of the broader (commercial, industrial, cultural, and political) implications of the presence or lack of overt queer representation in *The OC*. ¹³

Fan discussions about the ramifications of *Smallville*’s queer meanings took a different path. For while *Smallville*’s connection to *Superman* may open up fantasy as an outlet for queer expression, because *Smallville* is a prequel to *Superman*, the ending is already determined, at least in broad strokes. Thus, for *Smallville* fans, there could never be a question of whether the queer subtext would become overt in the official narrative—the program cannot feasibly conclude with Superman and Lex Luthor becoming lovers, given its connection to an already established, highly invested American cultural myth and commercial cross-media narrative. So, rather than considering whether Clark will ever “really” come out to Lex, *Smallville* fans read the intentionality of the subtext as pointing to deeper meanings in the show itself. Viewers recognize that rendering Clark and Lex as both queer *and* sympathetic (or better yet, as sympathetically queer) does much to complicate the traditional values supposedly embodied in the depiction of Smallville as all-American small town. For if *Smallville* presents the two main characters not only sympathetically, but sympathetic precisely because of their difference, then the rightness of normalcy itself is challenged. And if this disruption is intentional, this changes the very purpose of the show itself.

Many *Smallville* slash fans connected Lex’s confinement in “Asylum” (and the reluctance of others, Clark’s parents included, to help him) to the threat to heteronormativity which Lex embodies. Furthermore, they saw this interpretation as an intended meaning—that viewers were being encouraged to criticize Clark’s parents’ actions and sympathize with Clark and Lex. Such a reading posits this *Smallville* storyline as an intentional critique of close-minded, small town adherence to strictures of normalcy more generally and heteronormativity specifically. In an essay on this subject, one fan scholar wrote:

I think that what … they’re trying to show is that THIS is what Clark has to leave behind. *Smallville* is not just a place, it’s a mindset … At their best, they’re hard-working people … At their worst, they’re insular, self-righteous, limited in their world view and actively antagonistic towards people/things that mess up their happy, shiny world … An interesting HoYay parallel is that I believe a lot of young gay people find themselves stifled in rural towns [and] move to the big city in hopes of finding a place where they can be themselves.¹⁴
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This analysis connects the perceived thematic concerns of *Smallville*, Clark’s growth into an adult who must make his own choices and move beyond the constraints of his small town, directly to the experiences of gay youth, using the fan concept of “HoYay” to make this leap. Other fan interpretations even more directly relate the events of “Asylum” to “real life” issues of homophobia. One commenter likened the rescue scene in “Asylum,” in which Clark is attacked by meteor freaks while attempting to save Lex, to a scene of gaybashing:

Did anyone notice the Gaybashing like subtext of JTT catching Clark in the process of saving Lex, his male lover?… It looked like a college frat bashing of gay men caught in the act of intercourse or an intimate moment … as Clark was being dragged away, the plaintive cries of Lex trying to stop them, and calling out Clark’s name.

Rather than understanding *Smallville’s* queer meanings as distinctly separate from the program’s overt narrative, these quotes demonstrate that fans see those meanings as deeply connected to *Smallville’s* broader thematic project, expressed through *Smallville’s* use of fantasy as metaphor. They posit that a queer reading of Clark and Lex’s relationship relates directly to *Smallville’s* recurring sympathy for the experience of the alienated freak. In addition, *Smallville* fans recognize that the fantastically articulated queer meanings in *Smallville* may both be intentional and have political significance. Thus, fans perceive themselves as part of a multi-dimensional process of cultural creation and communication, understanding the production and reception of fictional televisial texts such as *Smallville* and *The OC* as potentially imbricated in broader issues of culture and politics.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have connected issues of genre to varying manifestations of queer meanings, exploring the ways in which these meanings can
function thematically and metaphorically. In Smallville’s teen fantasy, the themes of alienation and the search for identity easily transmute into homoromanticism and sympathetic queerness. In The OC’s realist teen melodrama, the possibilities of an overtly queer romantic narrative submerge into wordplay directed specifically at an audience looking for it.

These transgenerically inflected differences between the queer subtexts in Smallville and The OC result in varying audience discourses. Fans of The OC discuss the significance of subtext becoming text, taking into consideration issues such as queer visibility and marketability; Smallville fans discuss the significance of representations of difference, community, and normalcy. One addresses context, the other content. Both reveal how fans see themselves as engaging with the thematic, ideological and sometimes even political concerns of the TV shows they watch.

In Textual Poachers, Henry Jenkins draws on Eve Sedgwick to suggest that slash reveals the homoerotic present in the homosocial.15 Jenkins thus envisions slash interpretations as part of the dynamic of fan “poaching” in which fans pick and choose (somewhat) available meanings for their own usage and then “scribble in the margins.” However, the fans cited here see themselves as decoding hidden (or not so hidden) meanings in Smallville and The OC, meanings which may be available due to the multiple authors and contributors involved in the production of these constantly fluctuating televisual texts. Fans understand the TV shows they view as the process and product of many intersecting factors—personal, social, industrial, and political—and see themselves as playing a role in that process.

While transgeneric differences influence the range of queer representations and shape the direction of fan discourse, in the end, despite their difference, both Smallville and The OC demonstrate the flexibility of fan engagement with media texts. I am not simply arguing that the televisual texts of The OC and Smallville are complex and contradictory, with multiple meanings available to audiences looking for them, but that viewers perceive the text as such, and even more so perceive their engagement with that text in fluid and shifting terms. Fans may see themselves in a struggle with producers and aligned with actors over character interpretation, or as having the responsibility to make subtext text in fanfiction. At the same time, fans may see themselves as astute readers gleaning an intended but overlooked vision, or as recognizing the yet-to-be-revealed truth of a program’s thematic focus. All of these possibilities can coexist in fans’ understanding of their relationship with the media texts they view, be it Smallville’s teen fantasy or The OC’s realist teen melodrama, and not necessarily in conflict as one might expect. For example, a fan may perceive herself simultaneously as a resistive viewer and as unpacking an intended meaning. In this way, fans can knowingly inhabit contradictory interpretive positions.16 As scholars of spectatorship and fandom, we could take a cue from this rich and flexible understanding of media viewership held by fans themselves.

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Notes


3 I draw on quotes from a variety of different sources, ranging from bulletin board postings to more formal fan/scholarly essays available online. I will not give specific references to bulletin boards out of consideration for the maintenance of these spaces as fan spaces and the privacy of their participants. I have also edited the frequent typos that occur in mailing list postings to make the messages more readable, but have otherwise kept the messages intact with their original structure and wording. For a discussion of methodological issues involved in studying online communities, see Storm King, “Researching Internet Communities. Proposed Ethical Guidelines for the Reporting of Results,” *The Information Society* 12:2 (1996): 119-127 and Sharon Polancic Boekefeld, “Doing the Right Thing. Ethical Cyberspace Research,” *The Information Society* 12:2 (1996): 141-152.

4 Louisa Ellen Stein, “‘A Transcending-Genre Kind of Thing’: Teen/Fantasy TV and Online Fan Culture” (Ph.D.-diss., New York University, projected 2005).


7 For analysis of the changing significance of Superman in American culture over the last century, see Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).


11 In The OC’s second season, the program’s realist approach to teen issues did indeed result in an overt queer narrative, but not between Seth and Ryan as fans had hoped. Rather, The OC’s arguably groundbreaking televisual representation of a same sex romance is displaced from Seth and Ryan to two side characters, Marissa (Ryan’s original love interest) and the newly introduced character, Alex.


14 This is excerpted from a bulletin board discussion. Mobiusklein’s finished essay on this subject, entitled “Jonathan and Martha Kent and the Moral of the Smallville Story: An Analysis” can be found at: http://www.panfandom.com/nuke/modules.php?name=News&amp;file=article&amp;sid=1166.


16 In her essay on soap opera fans, Rapping also speaks to this fluidity of fan perception. Rapping, “‘Daytime Utopias: If you Lived in Pine Valley, You’d Be Home,” 47-65.