THE CW ARROWVERSE AND MYTH-MAKING, OR THE COMMODIFICATION OF TRANSMEDIA FRANCHISING

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ABSTRACT

The CW's influence over the American network television landscape has never ceased to grow since its creation in 2006. The network's audience composition reflects The CW's strategies to improve its original content as well as diversifying it, moving away from its image as a network for teenage girls. One of the key elements which has supported this shift was the development of the Arrowverse, a shared narrative space based on DC-inspired original series which provided the network with a fertile groundwork to build upon. The CW did not hesitate to capitalize on its not-so-newfound superhero brand to induce a circulation of myth, relying on these larger-than-life characters at the heart of American pop culture to fortify its cultural and historical bedrock and earn its seat along the rest of the Big 4. This paper aims to decipher how The CW pioneered new technology-based tools which ultimately changed the American media-industrial landscape of the early 2010s, putting these tools to the test with the network's superhero series. It will thus also address how the Arrowverse set of characters has triggered cross-media and transmedia experimentations, how The CW stimulated rapport with its strong fan base, as well as how the network has been able to capitalize on the superhero genre's evocative capacities.

Ever since Mark Pedowitz succeeded Dawn Ostroff at the head of The CW in 2011, it is not uncommon to see the Big 4 (CBS, FOX, ABC, NBC) turned into a Big 5, adding The CW to the 4 historical juggernauts. Under Pedowitz's direction, the very structure of The CW changed, differentiating itself from the rest of the Big 4, most notably through cross-media partnerships that have now changed the landscape of American TV. In 2012, the CW was the first network to become associated with Nielsen Online Campaign Ratings in order to produce precise statistics and data for its viewership on all platforms, based on their targeted audience, the highly coveted 18-49 niche[1]. They changed the way that we have become accustomed to analyzing viewership – all US networks now collaborate with Nielsen to provide them with a very precise and occasionally confusing landscape of their viewership. On top of this analytical partnership, the CW's Executive Vice President of Marketing and Digital Programs Rick Haskins reaffirmed in 2012 the network's digital ambitions at the forefront of their developing strategies, all of which were in tune with converging media platforms and which highlighted the role of social media (Wallenstein 2012). As a result, they also started to collaborate with the now-closed Immersive Youth Marketing company, "a full service agency that helps motivate consumers to action"[2]. The company's website described the objective as follow:

Warner Bros. Entertainment Group was interested in tapping into the power of fandoms, influencers, ecommerce and social media of viewers who were watching Millennial centric television programming on The CW Network. Immersive was partnered with a social media entertainment start-up, code named Kumbuya, that was spun out of the Warner Bros. Media Camp accelerator program, to gauge the power of online fan communities, influencers and the viability of turning fan energy and interest into sales revenue. The founding philosophy was to create the ultimate online gathering place where The CW Network could partner with and empower influencers with a forum where they can share fan art, UGC, view premium show content, build a robust fan community and connect with the stars of their favorite CW programs (Immersive Youth).

On the one hand, the fact that this then-innovative strategy was launched by the Warner Bros. studios reasserted the historical filiation of The CW, but on the other, it mostly proved that the network understood from very early on the benefits of a convergence-centric approach. Even if The CW has not been able to maintain its leadership with the 18-49 target audience, the network is, however, still ahead in terms of funding for its programs thanks to the streaming partnerships it was able to conclude. In 2011, The CW signed unprecedented deals with both Hulu and Netflix, putting the network's original programs on the platforms once the season was over. These partnerships came to an end in June 2016 when The CW renegotiated their streaming offer solely with Netflix with a new deal which changed many things for the network's ad-revenue strategy[3]. The network cultivates its edge in order to better fit the evolving marketplace of network television and always seems to pre-empt its competitors. In doing so, it also leaves its imprint on American TV history with its strategic choices setting it apart. Mark Pedowitz understood how this approach would prove to be a strong asset for the changing network business and used the hybrid nature of The CW as one of its strongest qualities:Since the initial landmark deal in 2011, The CW's programming has enjoyed tremendous success and increased exposure through Netflix, and our new agreement not only continues but enhances this valuable relationship. The CW has positioned itself for the future by transforming into a true hybrid network, rooted in broadcast while fully embracing the digital and streaming habits of the viewers (Prudom 2016).

This very hybridity of the networks is what seemed to motivate The CW's ongoing media conglomeration blueprint, leading to the network's increasing presence on social media, the launch of the web-based CW Seed, the pro-

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1 "The CW is the first TV network to sign on with Nielsen Online Campaign Ratings for complete measurement of its online ad inventory, tagging every online video ad and using the solution to offer advertisers demographic guarantees for every online campaign during the 2012-2013 season." Nielsen's official website (2012). http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2012/the-cw-to-use-nielsen-online-campaign-ratings.html (last accessed 12-05-18)

2 "We're Immersive Youth Marketing, a full service agency that helps motivate consumers to action. Our hybrid model is focused on authenticity–combining brand strategy, social technologies and engaging real world experiences that resonate with young people and parents. Immersive projects impact targeted audience segments to create a long-lasting and profoundly connective bond between consumers and your brand. Immersive delivers personalized solutions designed to create awareness, inspire conversation, generate sales lift, and increase retention." (Immersive Youth) Marketing official website. http://www.immersiveyouthmarketing.com/agency (last accessed 12-05-18)

3 "The CW is structured like a broadcast network, with affiliated stations across the country and a set weekly primetime schedule. It does not, however, operate very much like its fellow broadcasters. Thanks to a very generous streaming deal with Netflix — which allows complete seasons of shows to stream just eight days after their on-air seasons end — the pressure to chase ratings and ad dollars is arguably lower at The CW than at other networks. The deal is reportedly worth up to $1 billion per year. By comparison, the network's upfront ad sales last year totaled about $500 million." (Porter 2017)

grams' accessibility through Netflix as well as noteworthy participation in fan-oriented events such as ComicCon. This plan of action follows rather precisely what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green wrote in 2013 in their collective monograph *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, especially how it highlights the value of media engagement[4]. For instance, this media engagement can refer to the need for the network to take into account how the audience members relate to the network's series; how fans, outside of just sharing their impressions, are also given the opportunity to engage directly with the network's content. The CW has encouraged this through the many live chats with actors, script writers and producers on Facebook or Twitter at the end of some episodes, as advertised at the bottom of the screen while the episode is being broadcast. Through this media conglomeration and its diverse sources of revenue comes media consolidation, reinforcing both the network itself as well as its circuit of influence. The comfortable financial net provided by this cross-media policy also allows the network to apprehend the future with relative security, explaining why The CW tends to announce its renewals and cancellations earlier than do other American networks.

But the CW's somewhat comfortable situation has come under fire and has led several critics to deplore the network's lack of originality in its programming, referencing the franchising of superhero-themed TV series which followed the appearance of *Arrow* on the network's schedule in 2012. The overwhelming presence of several DC franchises, namely *Arrow, The Flash, Legends of Tomorrow, Supergirl* and *Black Lightning*, has been perceived as colonizing the network's programming grid as well as anesthetizing its creativity:

> With the way its business is set up, it would seem The CW has a chance to take some bigger swings with its programming. The network's #brand is superheroes right now, and it was teen dramas before that. But it doesn't have to be. It might do well to follow the lead of channels like FX, which has a well-established rep for supporting its show creators, or the similarly young adult-focused TBS (Porter 2017).

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4   "The television industry's gradual evolution from an appointment-based model to an engagement-based one reflects shifts occurring across the media industries, as networked communication makes visible the once invisible work of active audiences in creating value and expanding engagement around media properties. The logic behind purchasing an imagined mass and passive audience is breaking down, and demographic segmentation by age and gender is being questioned. In this environment, marketers will have to find new ways to account for audiences and to value the purchase of advertising space. Any new system must respect the importance of surplus audiences and the role active audience members play as grassroots intermediaries shaping the experience of other audience members." (Jenkins et al. 2013: 152)

Not only did The CW expand its DC titles up to 5 superhero-themed TV series, but their original status can also be questioned given the long history these characters have had with the audience. If *The Flash* and *Supergirl* can be considered remakes (the former first adapted by CBS in 1991, the latter made into a 1984 feature film), *Arrow* could be considered as both a spin-off and a reboot of the character following *Smallville*'s cancellation, while *Black Lightning*[5] is the first adaptation of the comic book character and *DC's Legend of Tomorrow* the only original series. Because of the franchising process induced by the network, each series blurs with the others, as it becomes increasingly difficult to clearly differentiate a reboot from a remake or even, at times, from an adaptation. As argued by Anat Zanger in *Film Remakes as Ritual and Disguise*, all remakes rely on "the dialectic of repetition, the dialectic between old and new, before and after, desire and fulfillment" (Zanger 2006: 9), characteristics that all DCTV series seem to share as they rely on the same setups and tropes, as well as the same proportion of intertextuality and cross-casting to both reinforce and showcase a coherent shared universe. People are usually surprised upon learning that *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* is actually an original title created by The CW which DC Comics turned into a comic book a few months later, even further challenging what reboot, remake or adaptation mean or imply for the network. But what truly binds the DCTV series together would be the dialectic of "desire and fulfillment," forces that are consistent with the goals of any TV series: to gain momentum and generate a faithful viewership, no matter its original status.

In every DCTV series, the intertextual play of repetition and difference becomes integral to the viewing experience and instills a certain depth to both form and content, elements that could benefit The CW's objective of rivaling the biggest historical networks. Grounding many of its original programs on the superhero phenomenon that has taken over the American film industry in the past decade was also carefully thought out. The case of The CW DCTV series is thus interesting because it has been instrumental in helping the network to secure a higher position within the U.S. media-industrial landscape. In doing so, it also demonstrates how the transmedia franchising strategies surrounding the Arrowverse of the CW ultimately helped the network to strengthen its brand, if not write its own myth. Relying on

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5   It should be noted here that because Black Lightning was developed by a different team, and is still fairly recent on the network, fewer attention will be given to it in this paper, even though it is part of The CW DC-TV properties and part of the Arrowverse.

such well-known characters – landmarks of American pop culture – allows The CW to be easily identified by anyone while simultaneously not straying too far from its historical brand. This provides the network with more than enough myth to emulate that of the Big 4 and earn its place among a new Big 5.

1. PURSUING THE MYTH

Since 2011, The CW has sought (and succeeded) to find a more mature and more masculine audience through its superhero brand, with *Arrow* and *The Flash* serving as the network's flagships of the genre. *Supergirl* was a valuable addition when it moved to The CW for its second season, balancing out the genre with a more feminine-targeted superhero-themed program, relying on more romance/drama-oriented narratives which the network has been known for. In this respect, gender-based audience shifts have been one of the main prisms through which the Arrowverse has been apprehended and analyzed (Foggi 2015, Levin 2015, Holloway 2017, Francisco 2018). With a total of 5 superhero-themed programs, The CW can feel a bit overcrowded by its DC properties, but the superhero genre is nothing new to the network's history. *Smallville* (2001-2011) ran for 5 seasons on The WB and 5 more on The CW, a series that is, to date, the most successful superhero TV show of all time. *Smallville* was a truly pivotal show that contributed to smooth over the WB-to-CW transition. Over the course of its 10 seasons, this remake/adaptation of one of the most beloved (as well as recognizable) comic book characters of all time can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, focusing on Clark Kent's youth was the best way to go for a network mostly focused on teenage drama, but it also allowed the network to detach itself a little from the weight of the many other iterations of Superman either in comic books, cartoons, other TV series or films, all focusing mostly on the full-fledged adult superhero. In choosing to focus on Clark Kent's high school years, the series had materials to draw from with the *Superboy* comics, but they could also use this origin story to their advantage. As they addressed the coming of age of a mythic cultural figure, they could also draw from the already existing superhero mythos of Superman and, as they did, benefit from the radiation provided by the star-packed gallery they could choose from.

Smallville was not really about creating a myth of its own, it was about pursuing an already significant mythology that many Americans were familiar with, especially those outside of the teenage audience niche that the network was then known for. The value of media engagement was clear in the WB-CW's strategy with *Smallville*, as they grounded the casting of the show, especially its guest stars, in constant reference to the existing Superman multimedia archives. The series thus related to its audience on many different levels: on the one hand, the teenage drama resonated with the usual network's viewership, while on the other, the precise references to Superman's mythology echoed to a more mature (and male) nostalgic audience who grew up with the comics, cartoons or films of the Kryptonian superhero.

Smallville broke new ground with intermittent type or cross-casting, and it heavily relied on the presence of illustrious guest stars in its storytelling, with actors and actresses that were all linked either to the Superman mythos or to Science Fiction. While typecasting implies that these guests portrayed characters that would echo their previous roles within the superhero genre and thus be used as metanarrative tools, cross-casting is rooted in marketing objectives, using the actor's or actress's persona to attract his or her audience. This strategy aimed for the added value brought about through typecasting, as argued by Richard Dyer in *Stars*, a value which he explains when discussing how stars function as meaningful signs for audiences to decipher (Dyer 1998: 87-150). Denise Mann's argument of the "spectacularization of everyday life" and how the recycling of stars impact television shows is also insightful when dealing with typecasting (Mann 1991: 333-360)[6]. Among the many prestigious guests was Christopher Reeve, cast as Dr Virgil Swann, a founding member of the Veritas Society who swore to protect the Traveler, a.k.a. Clark Kent. The most well-known cinematic Superman was a protecting figure for 2 seasons, until the actor's death in 2004. Teri Hatcher, Margot Kidder, Dean Cain, Lynda Carter, Terence Stamp, Michael Shanks, Carrie Fisher and Michael Hogan all played emblematic roles in the series, roles that would in some way refer to their historical affiliation with the genre and characters they portrayed before. With these casting choices, The CW did not shy away from the fact that they were not reinventing serial narratives since everyone knew from the start how a young Clark Kent series would end, but the network also experimented on casting choices driven by narrative, meta-narrative, and marketing motives. All these references induce an intertextual play within pop culture, with hints anchored in science fiction franchises or other comic book adaptations. Including these

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6   Denise, edited by Jeremy Butler, 333-360.

references in the series' narratives also enables the audience to play with them according to the shared knowledge that the writers appeal to. In *Smallville*, the network introduced legendary actors for the 'virgin' viewers who were unfamiliar with their previous roles in the Superman mythos, but simultaneously it intended to play and/or reinvent these roles for the people aware of the icons that they are. Building on the persona of the actors and of the characters they previously played also grants them a symbolic dimension serving as triggers for different levels of interpretation: Christopher Reeve is a fatherly protective figure for Tom Welling's Clark Kent, whereas Dean Cain who portrayed Superman just a few years before in *Lois & Clark* (ABC, 1993-1997), is cast as a rival to Tom Welling's portrayal of the character.

With *Smallville*, The WB/CW began playing more and more with intertextuality outside of the source material the series was adapted from. The series did hint at the comics, but the most efficient references (in terms of the largest number of people in the targeted audience who would get them) were not comic book-related, but based on the Superman mythology that had already been adapted to the silver and TV screens. Capitalizing on *Smallville*'s success, it came as no surprise that The CW would somehow lean on a similar intertextual pattern for its superhero series to come.

Even more so, with the creation and development of the Arrowverse, the very process of making the DCTV series reflected convergence through the new collaborations and partnerships that were put in place between different actors of the entertainment industry, convergence made more visible with the franchising plan of action launched by The CW:

> Media franchising extended this logic of industrial connectivity, not merely offering iconic brands across multiple markets, but also formalizing collaborative production across boundaries of market, production culture, and institutional identity to reproduce culture over time and across media sectors. (Johnson 2013: 233)

In his concluding remarks, Derek Johnson identifies how franchising enables an infinite series of remakes ("to reproduce culture over time") but also how franchising is now supported by innovative ways of collaborating that are themselves precipitated by notions of convergence. The converging dynamics behind the CW's reboot of DC titles following the cancellation of *Smallville* were also shaped by the fact that the comic book industry and the network were brought

closer together, notably through the concretization of an 11th season of *Smallville* in comic book format which was published by DC Comics in 2012. This transmedia collaboration influenced, in turn, the production team behind The CW DCTV series which has been helmed by Greg Berlanti, but he surrounded himself with people from the comic book industry in order to create and develop the different series of the Arrowverse. Berlanti partnered with Marc Guggenheim[7] and Andrew Kreisberg[8] for the development of *Arrow*, with Kreisberg and Geoff Johns[9] for the development of *The Flash*, with Kreisberg and Ali Adler for the development of *Supergirl* and with Guggenheim, Kreisberg and Phil Klemmer for the development of *Legends of Tomorrow*. While Berlanti is still a producer of *Black Lightning*, the series itself was developed by comic-book enthusiast Salim Akil. The collaboration with comic book professionals is also perceptible through the different writers who scripted some Arrowerve episodes: Guggenheim, Kreisberg, and Johns but also Bryan Q. Miller, Ben Raab, Kevin Smith, Sterling Gates or Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, etc. Through this close collaboration with comic-book writers, The CW made sure that it would have the support and find the acclaim of both the industry as well as comic book culture consumers. The network thus also ensured that the series' story-arcs would not depart too far from the original material. But the network also largely included comic book professionals in order to successfully translate a shared narrative universe through a franchising system that is commonplace within the comics publishing industry. The arrival of Arrow on The CW also coincided with an event which occurred at DC Publications, the New 52. While reboots and remakes are now a commonly known strategy in television and cinema, they are also used to maintain readership by the comic book industry. With storylines sometimes beginning in the 1940s, these reboots invite new readers to join without having to take into account more than 70 years of previous publications. Following the "Flashpoint" story-arc, DC's New 52, which happened in August 2011, reinvented all its comic book titles, *Green Arrow* included, a strategy that would set off the subsequent adaptations of The CW and generate a

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7 Guggenheim wrote for several Marvel comic book titles such as The Amazing Spider Man, Young X-Men, Wolverine and The Punisher as well as DC Comics titles such as Aquaman.

8 Prior to Arrow, Kreisberg wrote for several DC comic book titles such as Green Arrow and Black Canary as well as Batman Confidential.

9 Geoff Johns is a well-known comic book writer who collaborated mainly with DC comics on The Flash, Superman and Green Lantern but also for Marvel comics on The Avengers title.

FIGURE 1. ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY'S COVER DATED NOV. 18, 2016 AND A POSTER FOR ABC'S *SUPERFRIENDS* (1973).

cohesive business model across different media. In doing so, DC mimicked the already successful design of the Marvel Cinematic Universe/Marvel publications conglomerate, but preceded it in regard to the TV series, as Marvel developed its first TV series with ABC and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* in 2013.

The development of the Arrowverse on The CW – which began with *Arrow* in 2012 – thus seemed as a logical next step for the publisher's titles. The multiple references to the number 52 in both *Arrow* and *The Flash* emphasize the crucial importance that the publisher's reboot had for the CW series, while reminding the audience that the New 52 comics books were there for them to dive into, should they want an extra dose of superhero stories. Appealing to nostalgia while also presenting something new in a genre that was already popular, The CW relied even more directly on cross-media references, ones that magazines such as Entertainment Weekly caught on and used, inducing an atmosphere of cross-media circulation through franchising perspectives.

The magazine's cover can be read on three different levels. First, the actors are in costumes but clearly not in character. Even if *Arrow*'s Oliver Queen became friendlier over the past few seasons, he would never hug his teammates or grin like that. These are Grant Gustin, Melissa Benoist and Stephen Amell playing around, dressed as their characters, all conveying the friendly CW vibe of the Arrowverse that they also advertise on their respective Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. As we are confronted to the actors themselves, we are thus presented with a cover showcasing production, not narration. Second, the cover's marketing intent was not to

display a fun photoshoot among the three leads, as it was released to promote the upcoming massive crossover entitled "Invasion", the first time that any network orchestrated a crossover unfolding over a week and 4 different series/episodes: *Supergirl*, *Arrow*, *The Flash* and *Legends of Tomorrow*. It thus promoted most of the DC series at once but also The CW, commanding respect for its unprecedented shared-narrative achievement.

Finally, another level of intertextual play is rampant with the "Superfriends" caption. The original "Superfriends" show was a Saturday morning cartoon lineup produced by Hannah Barbera and broadcast on ABC from 1973 to 1986. Many young Americans grew up with these Saturday morning cartoons and remember that the Superfriends were all based on DC comic book characters, primarily those from the Justice League. This reference is made to appeal to viewers who are now right at the core of the 18-49 target audience of The CW shows and who, if they are not already watching the show, might tune in to revive some childhood memories.

In choosing to articulate the network's expansion and new cross-media ventures on superhero narratives, The CW capitalized on a genre that was already associated with the network as well as already popular worldwide, but it also implied a mythical collective imaginary which could, in turn, serve The CW's brand. Supported by the network's playful multimedia marketing and narrative strategies, and inspired by the converging aspects now linked to the original medium, the elements were aligned for a franchising strategy that had never been seen before on American network television.

2. REBOOTING THE MYTH

Because superheroes have been around for a long time and in many different forms on American television, it could be argued that they represent the epitome of what remakes or reboots stand for. Jonathan Gray's argument in the concluding remarks of *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, reinforces this idea:

> The worlds of Marvel and DC Comics can at times appear to be conducting a colonial occupation of the summer box office, while simultaneously developing strong presences in televised animation, videogames and merchandising. Marvel and DC have trained audiences to expect infinite reboots and alternate uni-

verses, a strategy that allows James Bond-like ease of movement across media venues, but also restricts the prospects for a continuing narrative to be told across those venues (Gray 2010: 214).

The Arrowverse is completely rooted in that pattern. Not only did *Arrow* air a year after the end of *Smallville*, but it also occurred on the same network, thus addressing the same audience. If anything, Gray's notion of audiences 'trained' to the idea of the reboot for superhero narratives can take the Arrowverse as a case study. But the strategies behind The CW's reboot of DC titles following the cancellation of *Smallville* took the intertextual play even further. Because the character of Oliver Queen/Green Arrow was an integral part of *Smallville*'s plot, it made the reboot of the character and the launch of *Arrow* more complicated, yet not impossible.

From very early on, the network took the decision to produce a reboot rather than a spinoff as they were acutely aware of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's success in movie theaters, and knew they could eventually head in the same direction with a shared universe on television, for which *Arrow* would be the starting point. Since no other well-known live action series showcasing the character had been made outside of *Smallville*, Greg Berlanti and Andrew Kreisberg knew they would need to scout for a brand new cast, allowing them the blank slate needed to start something new. This tabula rasa situation consequently started a cross-casting/typecasting conundrum for the network, which tried to balance meaningful intertextuality with The CW's interests.

The cast of *Arrow* was thus fairly unknown for The CW audience. The male lead, Stephen Amell, who appeared as a guest in The CW series *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) and *90210* (2008-2013), was mostly known for his role of Jason in the third season of *Hung* (HBO, 2009-2011). As far as typecasting goes, Stephen Amell does correspond to the superhero archetypes (handsome and muscular white man), but as far as intertextual typecasting, *Arrow* took a risk and chose novelty. The series did, however, resort to cross-casting practices. Adding John Barrowman as Malcolm Merlyn to *Arrow*'s original casting call was a marketing-conscious choice since he was well-known for his role as Captain Jack Harness in the popular 2005 revival of *Doctor Who* (BBC 1, 2005-) and its *Torchwood* spinoff (BBC1, 2006-2011), thus peaking the interest of a sci-fi superhero-friendly audience[10].Because

the series' tone was a lot grittier and darker than what The CW had been known for until then, the audience they attracted was the one they wanted to draw to the network: older men. No wonder the network sought to adjust the target audience for the subsequent series that would form the CW Arrowverse. *Arrow*'s fans and critical acclaim of its first season gave momentum to the shared universe project and provided a solid base, also allowing The CW more freedom in the casting choices for the following projects. Therefore, the network decided to resort to a more forthright approach to cross-casting with the second superhero series *The Flash*, as The CW gave Grant Gustin the title role, an actor who was known for his role as Sebastian Smythe on Fox's *Glee* (2009-2015) and Campbell Prince in The CW's reboot of *90210*. The actor thus appealed to the core viewership niche of The CW, which has now become a champion of cross-casting the same actors in the different series of the network. Because The CW favored cross- to typecasting for Barry Allen, many fans were surprised by the network's choice, and turned to forums and social media to share their doubts about seeing the actor properly filling the shoes of the 'scarlet speedster'. *The Flash*'s casting call became a lot more intertextual when they decided to typecast the original televised Barry Allen on the show.

John Wesley Shipp was added to the cast of *The Flash*, a casting choice that made sense on both cross- and typecasting fronts. Marketing-wise, he played the role of Mitch Leery, Dawson's father in Kevin Williamson's *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003) thus appealing to the historical audience of the network. And narratively speaking, he portrayed the 1990 velvet-costumed Flash in the CBS series which aired in 1990-1991, a logical referential father figure for a reboot. As the series went on, the writers played around with the actor's persona. In *The Flash*, he plays 2 versions of Barry Allen's father: On Earth 1 he is Henry Allen, Barry Allen's biological dad, but on Earth 2 he portrays Jay Garrick. Jay Garrick is also known in comic book lore as the original Flash, which, in and of itself, John Wesley Shipp actually is since he was the first actor to ever portray the Flash in a TV series.

Even if *Supergirl* was on CBS for its first season, the producing team behind the show is exactly the same as the rest of the DCTV properties of The CW, which made the transfer from one network to the other a lot easier. The recipe behind

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10 It should also be noted that the third season of Arrow introduced the character

of Ray Palmer who would later join the cast of Legends of Tomorrow, portrayed by Brandon Routh, the Superman of Bryan Singer's 2006 Superman Returns and one of the 7 evil exes in the 2010 film adaptation of Scott Pilgrim vs. The World.

Supergirl's success remained exactly the same. A cross-casting choice for the title role with Melissa Benoist, *Glee*'s Marley Rose in the title role of Kara Danvers which raised the same doubts that Grant Gustin did a year before. Typecasting, however, was already quite strong in the first episodes of *Supergirl*, as if to solidify its raison d'être, with Dean Cain and Helen Slater as Jeremiah and Eliza Danvers, Kara's adoptive parents on earth. The typecasting of Laura Vandervoort as the villain Indigo was also a nod to Superman's televised mythology, since Vandervoort was the actress who portrayed Supergirl in *Smallville* a few years back.

In terms of cross-casting, a choice meant to attract adjacent audience targets was that of Mehcad Brooks as James Olsen, who was in *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014) and *Necessary Roughness* (USA, 2011-2013), which were also directed at the 18-49 target audience. When the show moved to The CW in 2016, the series had to come out strong since they knew they would lose fan-favorite Calista Flockhart as Cat Grant due to the changing location for the series' shooting. That is why Lynda Carter was typecast as the alien President of the United States Olivia Marsdyn, over-emphasizing intertextuality within the Superman mythos. To ensure its newcomer series would have the best possible chance to integrate the superhero roster of the network, The CW resorted to some more cross-casting. Chris Wood thus integrated the series as Mon El from Daxam for the second season. Wood had been cast as the villain Kai Parker in 2014 for the sixth season of *The Vampire Diaries*, where he quickly became a fan-favorite. Casting him in *Supergirl* would thus help the show to gain momentum within The CW brand as well as some more 18-49 female viewers.

Supergirl lost more than half of its viewership from its move to The CW, which prompted the network to rely once more on illustrious guests to compensate, hoping that typecasting would bring older viewers back to the series. Cast as Mon El parents – who were key characters for the second half of *Supergirl*'s second season – were Teri Hatcher as Rhea, Queen of Daxam, and Kevin Sorbo as Lar Gand, King of Daxam. The CW clearly brought heavy artillery with *Lois & Clark*'s Lois Lane and *Hercules*' Hercules (syndication, 1995-1999) as well as *Andromeda*'s Captain Dylan Hunt (Global TV, 2000-2005) to portray Supergirl's in laws. The typecasting strategy did not work as the ratings for these episodes were the lowest numbers for the season, maybe a sign that Jonathan Gray's "trained audiences" might not be so oblivious to these stunts anymore.

FIGURE 2. POPULAR MEME CREATED BY THE FANS WHICH CIRCULATED ON SOCIAL MEDIA SHORTLY AFTER THE 19TH EPISODE OF THE FIRST SEASON OF *SUPERGIRL* WAS BROADCAST.

If cross- and typecasting references work similarly between the different series of the Arrowverse through their casting choices, crossmedia intertextuality does not work equally between them. While some series are filled with references, they are more sparse in some others. For instance, because the casting call of *Supergirl* takes up a substantial part of intertextual references, the other jokes about pop culture are more sporadic or the series would appear as nothing more than a cheap palimpsest. The one character of the series that brought an ongoing flow of references was Cat Grant during the series' run on CBS, who was dropping celebrity names every other episode, sometimes mocking them or even making fun of herself as a celebrity, thus slightly disrupting the episodes' narratives and cracking the fourth wall.

This reference taken from the 19th episode of the first season became a viral sensation and a meme, as Calista Flockhart is actually married to Harrison Ford. Both *Arrow* and *The Flash* are a lot more crowded with pop culture references than *Supergirl*, and the two series work similarly in terms of pop culture intertext. These pop hints are mostly dropped by the comic-relief/tech-type of characters, namely Felicity Smoak for *Arrow* and Cisco Ramone for *The Flash*, even if other characters sometimes use them too. For example, in *The Flash*'s third season, Tracy Brand amusingly compares herself to Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984). But the one character who set the tone in terms of pop culture references is undoubtedly Felicity Smoak, a tech-savvy former gothic *hacktivist* dubbed "queen of the nerds". She is fluent in pop-culture references which she drops constantly

FIGURE 3. SAMPLE OF DIFFERENT ONLINE THREADS DISCUSSING THE OBVIOUS SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO CHARACTERS (BASILE 2016, ANU 2014 & SORA 2014).

in her fast-paced monologues, references that ultimately permeate the series' narrative.

But this intertextual play is a very useful marketing tool to make the target audience click, to hook them to the show, as if the series itself were telling them: It's ok, you're part of the gang, we know you know, we're part of the same world". This very inclusive strategy is reinforced by the pop reference-vectors in the series. These techies are valuable allies for the superheroes, precious associates who stand on the sidelines and who act as identification anchors for the aficionados of the genre. The nerd/geek community is not only the one reading comics, but they are also very receptive to the many sci-fi and pop culture references dropped here and there in the series. The CW decided to capitalize on this aspect, easing-in new viewers of the network, letting them know that they are on familiar terrain. These characters are reminders that everyone

is part of the collective imaginary that many of the viewers share, setting up a cultural community in which to engage, an objective clearly delineated by the Immersive Youth/CW partnership.

Yet sometimes, the references can also lead to an over-saturation of the initial narrative, and playing on archetypes and half-disguised references can come back to haunt the series. It is the case with Felicity who has been compared time and time again to *Smallville*'s Chloe Sullivan, but the subject has been trending on fan forums a lot more since the "Overwatch" code name was revealed. Indeed, the latter is more than reminiscent of that of Chloe in the last seasons of *Smallville*: Watchtower. Not only do the code names sound a lot alike, but the narrative purpose and characterization of the two blonde women are also very similar, something the viewers noticed.

The CW's perfect example of an oversaturated intertextual narrative is unquestionably their *Legends of Tomorrow* collective spinoff series. The superheroes constituting the team of the Legends are all secondary characters that have first appeared in *Arrow* and/or *The Flash*, making their central characters already referential to the series they are extracted from. Moreover, the series' basic plot line revolves around time travel, a narrative hinge that is in and of itself, also very referential. This mix thus results in characters who are referring to those from *Arrow* and *The Flash* in order to tie it all in, plus puns and jokes referencing the different periods of time that the team is travelling to. In *Legends of Tomorrow,* pop culture references are plenty, still delivered by the same archetypal characters: the tech-genius (and Felicity Smoak's ex) Ray Palmer and well-read historian Nate Heywood. Yet another referential level has been added to *Legends of Tomorrow,* with a metatextual dimension that pervades through the acting, direction, and tone of each episode, depending on the era they are in: a laid-back-fun-and-goofy-episode when they're in the '70s, a perpetual-technological-wonderment-episode when they're in the future, a racial-themed episode when fighting a zombie Confederate army during the Civil Car, a remake of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* when they're in the Wild West, a film noir-like episode when they're in Al Capone's Chicago, a Tom Cruise *Last Samurai* copycat episode when they're in feudal Japan, and so on.

Cross/typecasting as well as the different levels of pop culture intertext integrated in these shows all aim at supporting the rebooting movement of the network's DC titles. While the superheroes' auras appeal to childhood nostalgia for some, the intertext is here to bring those characters up to

date and smooth over their transition from sometimes outdated or kitsch narratives to a 2.0 digital era of which The CW aims to be a spearhead.

3. FRANCHISING THE MYTH

Relevance and novelty were thus two pillars that The CW had to build upon, notions that are far from obvious when dealing with the expansion of an already existing franchise: DC Comics. What the network had to find was how to develop its own version of the mothership's characters and integrate them within The CW brand at the same time. Once it was successful with the sophomore reboot of *Arrow*, the network only had to expand on a shared narrative universe while encouraging intersectionality, franchising its own DC-TV universe. For the network, transmedia remains the most efficient way to activate the circulation of these shared narratives, such as the ongoing "The Chronicles of Cisco" Tumblr page which consists of gif or meme-illustrated blog entries of *The Flash*'s fictional character, Cisco Ramone. But another project took the network's transmedia course in another innovative direction through the launch of the CW Seed during the fall of 2013.

CW Seed is The CW subsidiary online branch with an emphasis on kid-oriented programs. It is a digital entertainment studio and website, providing original content in sync with the one developed for the network, but it also took convergence of media forms a lot further, relying on the network's superhero properties. The animated series *Vixen* debuted on CW Seed in August 2015, introducing the character to the Arrowverse, with Grant Gustin and Stephen Amell voicing their costume-accurate animated superhero alter-egos. Voicing the African-born female mystic superhero was Megalyn Echikunwoke, an actress who later reprised her role as Vixen/Mari, but this time in live-action during the fourth season of *Arrow* following her introduction in the Arrowverse through the animated series. This was transmedia prowess that had never been attempted before – it was the first time a character introduced in the animated version of a shared narrative universe appeared afterwards in the live-action section of that same universe, keeping the same actress in the process.

The very production of the CW Seed *Vixen* was built according to early consumerist habits of the genre, habits the network managed to translate into efficient franchising strategies. The early viewers of superhero cartoons are now old

enough to be parents, and cartoons are, by definition, not intended for an adult audience. As it tried to lure the adult audience of the DCTV series with *Vixen*, the network played along the notions of guilty pleasure and transgression while maintaining the 'fun' side of the CW brand: Dare to defy.

This, again, is in line with the strategies developed decades ago by Warner Bros. for its DC properties. Indeed, Warner was the first to ever brand a cartoon with a subtitle that would change its very nature. When launched on Fox Kids in September 1992, the new Batman cartoon was entitled: *Batman: The Animated Series*. This semantic change prefigured the studio's long-term branding strategies that it would further develop on The WB and The CW.

Freed from unnecessary guilt for still watching superhero cartoons, older viewers could keep on watching them a little longer or occasionally. Such shifts in the very nature of these programs are also what paved the way for the huge successes of the live-action superhero genre both in cinema and on television.

Those kids who grew up in the 1990s are now adults in their early 30s, probably young parents, and if they tune in to watch *Vixen* in order to get their additional fix of CW superheroes, their kids might also enjoy what mom and/or dad are watching. Such kid-friendly programs could thus provide family-viewing time, and being an online service, CW Seed is accessible through phones or tablets, now a kid-favorite tool to watch cartoons everywhere. Capitalizing on this transmedia asset thus allows The CW to reach its target audience before they come of age, presenting them with an entry point to the network while at a very early age. Introducing a new character in the animated series format is not only efficient in referential terms with notions of remediations and/or transmedia ramifications, but it is also efficient in trans-generational marketing terms.

The introduction of *Vixen*'s lineage in *Legends of Tomorrow*, with the inclusion of Amara in the series' second season, is just a continuation of this strategy. As the Legends travel back in time, they welcome Mari's grandmother, Amara, to the team. Including *Vixen*-related content in *Legends of Tomorrow* is also rather consistent in franchising logics since it is the lighter in tone of the CW Arrowverse roster, and the most kid-friendly. The network has continued to develop animated versions of the Arrowverse. In December 2017 it released *Freedom Fighters: The Ray*, this time focusing on Ray Terrill who was introduced a few weeks before during the "Crisis on Earth X" four-episodes crossover. The CW Seed animated series again ventured in un-

FIGURE 4. THE ANIMATED/CUSTOMIZED DC/WB LOGOS APPEARING AFTER
THE END CREDITS OF THE DIFFERENT CW SUPERHERO SHOWS.

charted territory as it was the first time that a superhero animated series showcased a gay man as its central character. *Constantine: City of Demons* was released in March 2018, serving as a follow-up to *Legends of Tomorrow*'s third season finale, stressing once more the transmedia ramifications of the CW Seed platform. After NBC's cancellation of its live-action series *Constantine* (2014-2015) after only one season, The CW bought back the episodes that have been since added to the network's online streaming catalogue. Fan-favorite Matt Ryan who portrayed the DC Comics master of the occult in the NBC series reprised his role first in several episodes of *Arrow*, before appearing in *Legends of Tomorrow*, thus using the character as another binder for the expanding transmedia DC-TV universe.

The franchising mode of production of DC Entertainment is perceptible through the transmedia Arrowverse developed by The CW/CW Seed duo, but it is also very visible for each of the live action TV series of the network. Image being at the core of the original medium, Warner Bros. studio created logo visuals that would also emphasize the series' shared affiliation.

These are the different animated logos created by the network to conclude the end credits of each episode. These customized logos relying on the visuals developed by The CW are fun twists denoting attention to detail, but they are also revealing of The CW strategy regarding its superhero series. Playing upon imagery is something the aficionados of the genre will respond to particularly well since the series are all based on a highly visual medium: comic books. The fact that they did not create one single DC-WB logo for all the superhero series of the network, but created one for each, taps into collectability, a consumer habit strongly associated with the genre.

Comic book readers don't read just one title of comics, so playing around the visual singularity of each series superimposes the comic book format to that of the shows. It thus reinforces the parenthood of the two mediums, strengthening it through identifiable visuals that are appealing to audience reading practices, inciting them to reproduce these practices as viewing ones, cementing the link between readership and viewership through the genre it is stemming from. This might seem trivial, but the emphasis made on character-based visuals such as these is symptomatic of The CW's willingness to activate intersectionality within cultural practices. If the viewer wants to be able to truly decipher and apprehend the fictional world of The DCTV, then he or she will need to collect all of its narratives, from the live-action CW series to the CW Seed animated series, playing around with the dialectic of desire and fulfillment previously mentioned by Anat Zanger.

This notion of collectability works particularly well with that of the remake. As Zanger argues, "the remakes, the se-

quels, and even the trailers all participate in a pleasurable game of repetition which has contributed to turning the film into a fetish" (Zanger 2006: 16). Franchising comic book adaptations operates along similar forces, as the remake/reboot process creates a system of narrative objects which, through marketing and merchandising strategies, develop a distinctive visual identity that will not stray too far from the original. As a result, for the reimagined version to work it should not subvert the original character since it has become, in and of itself, a sort of fetish with its rules and canons to abide by. These superheroes, now branded as icons of American culture, trigger collecting impulses, by which new films and series are turned into narrative objects to be collected as well, apprehending them through the prism of memory, through recollection. These new stories are meant to be part of these characters' multimedia archives along with their comic books, films, series, video games and even life-like resin statues[11].

A more direct approach to transmedia narratives was also experimented by the network for the Arrowverse, following in the footsteps of successful comic book follow-up seasons of series such as Dark Horse's seasons 8 through 11 of *Buffy*, a WB alumni series, or comic book transmedia preque,l as with WildStorm's *Supernatural: Origins* (2007) and *Supernatural: Rising Son* (2008) of the cult CW series. The CW's first joint endeavor with DC Comics to produce a transmedia title started after the cancellation of *Smallville*. DC Comics published a 35 issue first volume titled *Smallville: Season 11*, a sequel to the series that was mainly penned by Bryan Q. Miller and which was published between July 2012 and May 2015, with no plans (as of yet) to keep the comic book title active.

Whereas Smallville's transmedia strategy was linear, with a comic book volume serving as a sequel, *Arrow* and *The Flash*, however, can be considered as tie-in transmedia series, since DC comics released comic books of the title heroes' new adventures that were integrated within the series' narratives. A 13-issue first volume for *Arrow* was published between January and December 2013, while a 12-issue second volume titled "Season 2.5" was published between December 2014 and November 2015. The 12-issue "The Flash: Season Zero" was published after the series premiered on The CW between December 2014 and November 2015, a misleading title since

the volume is not a prequel to the series. Instead, the comic book volume unfolds between the pilot episode and episode 2 of the first season, thus consisting in the very first missions of the Flash. The same strategy was adopted with *Supergirl* and the release of the 6-issue comic book *The Adventures of Supergirl*, published between July and September 2016, exactly when the series switched networks, moving from CBS to The CW. But these transmedia experiments – pursuing the franchising efforts of the Arrowverse in comic book format – were not successful enough for the publisher to consider pursuing future digital publications for CW-inspired comics of their existing characters. However, these transmedia comic book tie-ins, occurring during each series' early seasons, reinforce the strong links the series share with the original medium of the genre. And even if they were not as successful as the network had hoped, these transmedia narratives strengthened the franchising impulse of The CW.

The network however, primarily triggers media circulation through faithful story arcs and costumes adapted from the comic books, but it is never more successful than when it is supported by the different crossover events between the shows, reminding the viewers that, just like in the comics, these characters belong to the same world, to the same global narrative, to the same franchise. The spinoff pattern gave birth to *The Flash* as Barry Allen was first introduced in *Arrow*, and the same logic applied to the creation of *Legends of Tomorrow* since the Legends themselves are non-other than secondary characters from both *Arrow* and *The Flash*. But *The Flash* introduced a key notion that would make the network's franchising possibility limitless: multiversity. In *The Flash*, the theory of the multiverse is crucial to the series' narrative, but it is also one that is key to the before-mentioned reset storylines of comic book publishers. In this multiverse, each Earth has a number and is its own reality – a multiverse through which Barry and Cisco Ramone/Vibe can travel at will.

This notion enabled The CW to create new series narratively disconnected at first from the Arrowverse, to include them afterwards by stating that they were simply occurring on an alternate Earth of the DCTV multiverse. This has been the case for *Supergirl* and *Black Lightning*[12]. *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow* and *Arrow* are all taking place on Earth 1, while *Supergirl* is unfolding on Earth 38. No official indication has

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11   A line of DCTV collectible statues was recently launched by Sideshow Collectible, the world leader in the pop culture collectible industry. https://www.sideshowtoy.com/collectibles/dc-comics-the-flash-dc-collectibles-903600/ (last accessed 21-10-2018) https://www.sideshowtoy.com/collectibles/dc-comics-black-lightning-dc-collectibles-903419/ (last accessed 21-10-2018).

12   No official plan has been made to orchestrate any crossover between Black Lightning and the rest of the Arrowverse yet, but references to Supergirl and Vixen in the series were here to open up the possibilities for it to happen down the line.

yet been given for *Black Lightning*, but references to Supergirl in the series indicate that it might be also set on Earth 38. The essence of the multiverse itself as the ultimate franchising excuse was displayed on January 19, 2016 on The CW in a two-part one-hour special program composed of "Their Time is Now: DC's Legends of Tomorrow" followed by "DC Films Presents: Dawn of the Justice League", hosted by Kevin Smith and Geoff Johns (the then Chief Creative Officer of DC Entertainment).

The first part of the program was a rather usual promoting sequence presenting the series that would premiere the following week, while the second was a 30-minute promotion for *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* and other upcoming DC-themed films such as *Suicide Squad*. The most interesting part of that presentation was how Geoff Johns justified the presence of this program on The CW, as he stated on several occasions that what happens in movie theaters is, in the end, nothing more than an alternate Earth, different from the ones showcased in the DCTV series. Given what the audience knew of multiversity through *The Flash*, the argument presented was absolutely valid, but it simultaneously legitimized exponential versions (reboots, remakes or adaptations) to be told, justifying it with a narrative twist which has immensely complicated the comic book industry. At first, "multiversity" – part of the comic book jargon, now used by television and to some extent cinema[13] – has become nothing more than a new production model concordant with the business standards of multimedia franchising. The fact that it was hosted by two very emblematic and well-respected figures of the comic book industry also had an impact.

The production culture discourse is also revealing of the industry's intentions. As Caldwell notes:

> The fact that a great deal of what viewers see in film/TV critically mediates or deconstructs other forms of screen content may suggest that the newly convergent industry now leads by hyping its theoretical and critical sophistication to viewers. But this is not always the case. In fact, although deep texts and on-screen practices show a constant churn of critical and theoretical ideas among practitioners, actual spoken disclosures by industry players, in public, commonly deny or disavow

any agency or intellectual pretense. Far from being crass movers and shakers who exploit critical trends or cultural ideas, industry players tend to talk about themselves as being simple, honest, and direct; screenwriters as being in touch with the universalism of Aristotle's three-part drama and well-rounded characters; producers as responsively creating what the common person wants; executives as couching even the lowest-common denominator programming as opportunities for reflection, consensus, and therapeutic escape (Caldwell 2008: 317)

Calling upon Kevin Smith and Geoff Johns to host this program was the network/studio's best bet to be heard and understood by most. While the status as well as the very laid-back attitudes and non-conforming outfits of the two hosts appealed to the comic book culture fans, the duo's enthusiastic yet didactic explanations about the developing strategy for DC superheroes on and off The CW were clearly set. The given arguments were anchored in narrative terms rather than based on a production discourse, yet in the end, the multiverse argument has a lot more to do with production than it does with narration. Through this maneuver, The CW thus found another way to communicate that the producers of the DCTV series are first and foremost fans of the DC characters they are in charge of, thus crediting the network's production teams behind the series with both impeccable skills and undeniable devotion.

4. MARKETING THE MYTH

The favored tool used by The CW to consolidate the Arrowverse TV series as a cohesive whole balances out the multiversity argument's inherent contradiction of production vs. narration: the crossover event. These events reached an all-time high during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 seasons with a major story arc that unfolded across the four Arrowverse series. While the 2016-2017 "Invasion" arc did not fully include *Supergirl*, the 2017-2018 "Crisis on Earth X" fully integrated the four series in a storyline during which the characters are transported to an alternate earth where Nazis have won WWII. As these crossovers have become somewhat of a pre-Christmas hiatus tradition and are awaited impatiently by the audience, The CW does not necessarily need to advertise them anymore.

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13   Sony and the way it has dealt with its Spider Man films and reboots is one such example, especially instrumentalizing and emphasizing multiversity while promoting Venom (2018). Similar arguments were used repeatedly by the Fox Studio about their Marvel film franchises X-Men and Fantastic Four.

FIGURE 5. SELECTION OF PROMOTIONAL POSTERS FOR *THE FLASH*'S "DUET" EPISODE.

They are nevertheless key ingredients of the Arrowverse that tie the series' narratives together, but also very important marketing tools. While giving meaning to the DCTV franchise, crossovers also force the audience to watch the different superhero series of the network. Indeed, in order to see the entire crossover story-arc from beginning to end, the audience must tune in and watch the crossover episode for each series, thus inciting people to perhaps also start watching *Supergirl* if they weren't until then. The crossover practice thus serves a useful marketing stunt since the crossover events' peak ratings for each series clearly show that different people follow the four core DCTV series. While most definitely beneficial for the network in terms of revenue, the crossovers' narrative scopes and unbridled fun surpass the production's cruder interests[14].

But the crossover tool can also prove to be a little too heavily marketed at times. The cross-casting of *Glee* alumni Grant Gustin and Melissa Benoist inevitably led to the preparation of a musical-themed episode for the 2016-2017 season. Even though the episode itself, entitled "Duet", was part

14   The December 2018 crossover entitled "Elseworlds" will again serve a double purpose. On the one hand, Kate Kane a.k.a. Batwoman will be introduced (an adaptation here of the critically acclaimed and fan favorite New 52 comic book), and on the other, the crossover will be a springboard to assess how the audience responds to the character, as plans are already in motion to develop a solo series for this new Arrowverse character.

of the third season of *The Flash*, it was set up in *Supergirl*'s "Star Crossed" episode the night before as well as heavily influenced by the *Legends of Tomorrow*'s tone, a series whose second season was broadcast at the same time. In this single crossover episode, the circulation of intertextuality was perceptible as aligned more with The CW's marketing strategies than with the narrative demands of the different series.

Pop culture intertext saturated the "Duet" crossover episode. The fantasy musical world created by the Music Meister is set in a neo-noir tone but the meta-narrative dimension stemming from the actors contaminated the entire episode. The crossover's aesthetic promoted through various character posters and trailers completely took over the narrative aspect and clearly distanced the series from the superhero genre to fully ground itself into the realm of the musical genre.

This episode had been expected to happen ever since Melissa Benoist had been cast as Supergirl, with everyone aware that the two leads could sing – but not just the 2 of them. Before portraying Winn in *Supergirl*, actor Jeremy Jordan played rising Broadway musical superstar Jimmy Collins in the second season of ABC's musical series *Smash* (2012-2013). *Arrow* and *Legends of Tomorrow*'s John Barrowman has released 8 studio albums. Jesse L. Martin, who plays detective Joe West in *The Flash,* was the original Tom Collins in the Broadway musical *Rent*, while Carlos Valdes/Cisco Ramon and Tom Cavanagh/Professor Wells both came from musical theater as well. Almost all of the characters chosen to appear in "Duet" sing in some capacity outside of their acting careers, and the episode showcases these talents, setting off an intertextual play with ramifications completely eclipsing the explored storyline.

The CW knowingly played with and advertised around these cross-casting references, turning the "Duet" episode into more of a marketed pretext than a seamlessly integrated collective story-arc. On the crossover's main poster is inscribed "Dynamic Duet", which is not the actual title for the episode, but which was the title of *Glee*'s seventh episode of its fourth season. During this episode, the *Glee* misfits decide to get inspired by the power of superhero narratives to develop self-confidence, an episode in which Melissa Benoist's character Marley invented her superhero alter ego: Woman Fierce. Another alter ego developed in this episode of *Glee* was particularly relevant for the "Duet" crossover episode. Nightbird was Blaine Anderson's made-up superhero, the character portrayed by Darren Criss who also plays Music Meister in the crossover. Here, the dynamic duet is a complete double-entendre since it can refer to Supergirl and the

Flash teaming up, but it could also very well refer to the actual "dynamic duet" reunited: Melissa Benoist and Darren Criss. The references are both aggregated and superimposed in this episode, so much that it seemed as if "Duet" was nothing more than a marketing coup for the network, and the resulting imagery as well as the actors' personas ended up bypassing the compelling storyline that would have required a superhero team-up.

Yet what can sometimes feel like corporate opportunism by the network can also be generated by the audience itself in the now many ways that it can engage with pop culture serial objects. As a result of The CW's collaboration with Immersive Youth, the network has also been able to activate intersectional fan engagement as an alternative to costly ad campaigns. Whether on social media or fan forums, the other shows of The CW have managed to pervade through platforms or events that were initially solely dedicated to the superhero genre. For instance, one of the biggest websites of the genre, Comicbookmovie.com, has had weekly entries and articles written by the viewers for the viewers about *Supernatural*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Originals* and *The 100,* even if they are not superhero or comic book-related, at least not initially. Another striking example is The CW's overwhelming presence during the different ComicCons across the U.S., even for shows that have nothing to do with comic book culture or science fiction, such as the different *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* panels held during several San Diego Comic Conventions. These examples are perfect illustrations of what Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito and Danah Boyd explain as

FIGURE 5. THE CROSSOVER POSTER AND THE COMIC BOOK IT WAS INSPIRED FROM, *SUPERMAN* #199, 1967.

the core of participatory cultures, with narrative objects that are bridging across genres according to the will of the active audience (Jenkins et al. 2016: 184).

Another tool at the network's disposal, to spark what Javier Lozano Delmar has coined "fanadvertising," is the insertion of social issues and concerns within the DCTV series narratives. With the inclusion of problematic issues about gender, LGBTQI, and police brutality, fans engage online and generate debate and discussion about the series, providing the network with a greater online presence, mostly through the diverse array of social media, suggested through the "#" branding system often visible on the network logo inserts of the program.

The first ever crossover to occur for *Supergirl* was with *The Flash* in March 2016. During the episode "World's Finest" (1.18), a friendly rivalry between the two superheroes is palpable, rivalry which inspired the poster to promote the crossover event. Intertextuality is obvious in this case with the poster reproducing very precisely the cover of *Superman* #199, substituting the "fastest man alive" with "fastest person alive".

This crossover substituting Superman with Supergirl is also revealing of the network's decision to politically charge some of its narratives, using the allegorical figures of the superhero to address sometimes vivid contemporary issues. The DCTV series thus insert metaphorical subtexts for the viewers to hold on to while strengthening the series' credibility and relevance within the American broadcasting landscape. *Supergirl* has notably had its moments to promote female empowerment and feminism with women in leading positions. The same can be argued with *Legends of Tomorrow*, with women clearly taking the ascendant in leading and powerful positions in the team, with Sara Lance assuming the role of team captain from season 2 onward. LGBTQI representation, which has always been a cornerstone for The CW shows, has also been integrated in the series' narratives: Alex Danvers and Maggie Sawyer as a lesbian couple in *Supergirl*, Anissa Pierce/Thunder as an African-American lesbian superheroine in *Black Lightning*, Curtis Holt/Mr. Terrific as an African-American gay character in *Arrow*, Sara Lance, Ava, and John Constantine as bisexual characters in *Legends of Tomorrow*.

The political subtext, especially developed in *Supergirl* and *Arrow*, supports a similar purpose to solidify the series' pertinence. In Trump's America, the alien registry storyline in *Supergirl* clearly attempts to tackle divisive political issues with many plot points revolving around notions of asylum, refugees and immigration. While *Supergirl* is more meta-

phorical in its approach, *Arrow* is a lot more straightforward in its political stands. Starling City has always been depicted as having a fractured urban landscape which in turn created a fragmented society, leading to unequal urban development, insecurity and ghettoisation. This ongoing theme has evolved over the seasons, always putting the local and federal institutions at the center of the series' narrative: from the exploration of local government through the election of Oliver Queen as mayor, to the survey of the U.S. carceral situation through Oliver's downfall, convicted for vigilantism and an incarcerated felon in season 7. These plotlines open political grounds for the series to explore and in the episode "Spectre of the Gun" (5.13) *Arrow* tackled head-on a pressing issue in the US: the right to carry a gun[15]. The same issue of social fragmentation has been addressed by *Black Lightning*, but the series also explores in-depth endemic racism, opening its second season with a fake live-coverage of a police brutality incident. The CW does not hesitate to use its popular series as platforms to address these problems and question them, bringing the debate to the American youth, thus fortifying both its credibility and position as an influential network.

5. **CONCLUSION**

It has been argued repeatedly that superhero fatigue would first plague Hollywood and then the general audience which, if it were true, would be an ominous sign for The CW, whose programming grid is showcasing a vast array of superhero-themed series. If fatigue is supposed to come, it might very well originate from the fact that DC, whether on film or on TV, is showcasing similar characters, multiplying different versions of the Flash or Superman. But with the network maintaining its focus on the Green Arrow, Supergirl, the Legends and Black Lightning, it avoids repetition as these are not the studio's A-list members of the Justice League. The CW *Black Lightning*'s mid-season debut in January 2018 has been met with critical acclaim and very positive ratings. It may have benefitted from the overall hype surrounding the February release of Marvel's *Black Panther*, and an increased awareness for the need of a more diverse representation in the genre, but the series' first season, as it relied on The CW recipe, was mostly a success with story arcs and a back-story that did not shy away from a very political season-long storyline. Freeland,

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15 The whole episode revolves around the polarizing debate about gun control.

a predominantly African-American poor and ghettoized community, saw the rise of super-powered individuals because the government inoculated the population in the mid-60s with a vaccine that was supposed to make them more docile, keeping the civil rights agitation and protests to a minimum. Only time will tell if *Black Lightning* will crossover with the rest of the DCTV series in its future seasons, but given the show's success, it seems unlikely that it will remain an outsider to this universe, adding yet another level of complexity for the audience to dive into and decipher:

A new paradigm of television storytelling has emerged over the past two decades, redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. By exploring the formal structure of this mode of storytelling, we can appreciate connections with broader concerns of media industries and technologies, creative techniques, and practices of everyday life, all of which resonate deeply with contemporary cultural transformations tied to the emergence of digital media and more interactive forms of communication and entertainment (Mittell 2015: 53).

The CW's Arrowverse exemplifies Jason Mittell's main argument in *Complex TV* which contends that complexified serial narratives in American television have strengthened audience engagement but they have also cemented complicity (if not collusion) between producers and prosumers, notions that further pursue Henry Jenkins' convergence theory (Jenkins 2006). The CW viewer is no longer perceived as passive or as a static consumer but as an implicated agent, involved into elaborating his or her own culture: this cross- and transmedia agent does whatever he wants, and goes as far as she is willing to go, even taking part in the myth by contributing to it through fan fiction, fan art or vidding. Dealing with superheroes implies dealing with iconic and widely popular characters who are deeply rooted in the collective imaginary. They have been around for more than 80 years and the emotional appeal they trigger should not be underestimated. With the Arrowverse, The CW is building on the positive affect superheroes inspire, trying, through all possible means, to engage with the programs' targeted audience members, making them the active cultural agents the network knows they are. Through television and the recurring patterns of seriality, the viewers get to experience a new level of intimacy with these characters and this universe. Even more so, with the changing production practices induced by streaming plat-

forms such as Netflix, and the different narrative forms they engendered, the structured seriality associated with a more classical broadcast pattern of network television appeals to the viewers' comfort zone and nostalgia, a sentiment which echoes the ones motivated by the superhero motif.

The CW, in the very way that it has built its development strategies, has been a pioneer in activating effectively the sleeper agents that its viewers are. The Arrowverse and how it has been articulated by the network/studio conglomerate in marketing and narrative terms goes on to show how The CW has worked toward the biggest possible inclusion of its viewership, leaning onto a game plan which placed multimedia franchising at its core. The puns and jokes and references are all there to invite the viewers, to draw them further in to these narratives and engage with the appealing myths The CW revitalizes. Putting superheroes front and center has allowed the network to enjoy renewed success through fan and critically acclaimed series while expanding its audience base, but without distorting its DNA.

The multiverse argument also played a significant part of the franchising success of the Arrowverse as it plunged the entirety of DC characters into transmedia. This strategy was itself backed by the carefully chosen names of its different media iterations, making sure that they would not be limited by any media constraints: the Arrowverse and not the DCTV universe, the DC Extended Universe and not the DC Film Universe. As of 2009, DC Comics itself became a subsidiary of DC Entertainment and in October 2013, DC Comics moved from New York City to the Warner Bros. headquarters in Burbank, California. The launch of the streaming platform DC Universe in September 2018 offering the entire DC comic book catalog in digital format, as well as all the feature films, animated films, series, cartoons or animated series ever made about the DC properties tied into that strategy. DC Universe is the ultimate consumers' point of convergence to enter the realm of the DC transmedia multiverse. DC Entertainment was able to rebrand its archives through multiversity and now argues that all these versions are *meant* to exist alongside one another, and are not to be considered as reboots or remakes that would replace the originals, but simply new versions of these characters and narratives. Accordingly, the Studio's intent for the DC franchise appears as no longer questionable as it dismisses any profitability motives through multiversity, concealed by the fact that what could have been perceived as cross-media franchising paralyzing creativity, has now become transmedia story-telling for an augmented superhero imaginary.

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