

“Iconic and Beyond Reproach”: The Socio-Aesthetic Relevance of *Riverdale*

Paola Brembilla*

Chiara Checcaglini**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the aesthetic and narrative design of the TV series *Riverdale* (The CW, 2017–), where fashion, visual splendor and coolness do legitimate a seemingly non-sense narratives and ultimately contribute to produce cultural and social value. First, we contextualize *Riverdale* in the production ecosystem of the youth-gear network The CW. Second, we dwell on the concepts of *retro* and *coolness* to understand the mechanisms of *Riverdale*'s timeless charm and cool attitude. Third, we exemplify these aesthetic strategies by focusing on the design of the three leading female characters. Fourth, we explore the interplay between onscreen representation and offscreen self-representation of the actresses. Finally, we argue that the visual surface of the show becomes a tool to express commercial appeal and empowering values, which are not mutually exclusive.

Keywords: Riverdale; TV Series; Aesthetics; Vintage; Coolness.

* Università di Bologna (Italy); ✉ p.brembilla@unibo.it

** Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo (Italy); ✉ chiara.checcaglini@uniurb.it

Introduction

Teenagers that run a speakeasy under a diner and organize illegal boxe matches, that fight serial killers in their homes and a bear in the woods, that outsmart detectives and reporters to expose drug dealers, weird cults and organ traffickers... While sometimes going to high school and confronting bullies, slut-shaming, etc. All this set in the present day, but with a persisting retro aesthetic and fashion taste. This is *Riverdale*, where *Twin Peaks* meets *Gossip Girl* in a “show [...] so stylized, so clearly not aiming for verisimilitude that there’s no way it can be mistaken for pandering.”¹

Based on the characters of *Archie Comics*, *Riverdale* debuts on November 2017 on the youth-gearred network The CW and follows the life of a few teenagers in the small town of Riverdale. Along with wild and unlikely storylines (the one mentioned earlier are just a very few examples), the series stands out thanks to a reinterpretation of the comics’ settings and characters based on a hyper-aestheticization of the storyworld, expressed through smart visual and fashion choices. On the one hand, *Riverdale* merges retro atmospheres, settings, outfits, accessories and looks with more contemporary elements, designing an overall sense of timelessness. On the other hand, timelessness is part of a very self-aware, over-refined narrative and aesthetic mechanism, where excess and unrealistic representation contribute to design the “coolness” of the show.

The purpose of this paper is to explore these dynamics to see how a carefully designed aesthetics based on fashion, visual splendor and coolness can not only legitimate a seemingly non-sense narratives, but also ultimately contribute to produce cultural and social value.

First, we contextualize *Riverdale* in its production ecosystem, that of the youth-gearred network The CW and its rebranding strategy based on sophisticated narrative, audience engagement and progressiveness. Second, we dwell on the concepts of *retro* and *coolness* to elaborate and understand the mechanisms of *Riverdale*’s timeless charm and cool attitude. Third, we exemplify these aesthetic strategies by focusing on the design of the three leading female characters, in order to highlight the pivotal role of costume design in the construction of their iconic looks and personalities. Fourth, we explore the interplay between on-screen representation of the characters and off-screen self-representation of the actresses, that tend to build character-inspired public persona often involved in activism and social issues. Finally, we argue that the visual surface of the show does not end in itself, as it becomes the primary tool to express both commercial appeal and empowering values — which are not mutually exclusive.

Inside The CW’s Drive for Relevance

In order to understand the peculiar dynamics at play among the show’s layers of analysis, it is crucial to examine the industrial choices underlying its modes of production. In fact, as an important asset of The CW’s primetime lineup, *Riverdale* has contributed to shape the network’s rebranding strategy, but it has also been shaped by it.

The CW was formed in 2006 from the merger of the two mini-networks The WB (Warner Bros.) and UPN (Paramount), when they decided to join forces instead of competing for the same audience segments, notably those of teens and young adults.² The network started out by cherry-picking the most successful programs from the two parent companies, mostly melodramatic teen series at times featuring genre hybridization and complex storytelling.³ When it comes to original programming, The CW keeps following these lines of production and becomes the main outpost for either teen series and audience engagement. Series like *Gossip Girl* (The CW 2007–12), *Supernatural* (The WB, 2005–06; The CW,

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1. Alison Herman, “Teens Don’t Watch TV — So Why Do They Love *Riverdale*?”, *The Ringer* (October 18, 2017), <https://www.theringer.com/tv/2017/10/18/16492324/riverdale-season-2-teen-phenomenon>.
 2. Bill Carter, “UPN and WB to Combine, Forming New TV Network”, *The New York Times* (January 24, 2006), <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/24/business/media/upn-and-wb-to-combine-forming-new-tv-network.html>.
 3. For instance, *Gilmore Girls* (The WB 2000–06; The CW 2006–07; Netflix 2016), *Smallville* (The WB 2001–06; The CW 2006–11), *One Tree Hill* (The WB, 2003–06; The CW 2006–12).

2006–) and *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW 2009–17), became bluebooks for that kind of transmedia development and fan engagement that fully blossomed over the past four years, when a new course was put into place.

Faced with channels multiplication, content abundance and a general raising quality of the products, like the other networks The CW has found itself in need of a way to adapt to this new scenario by finding its own added-value, its own relevance. That is why, under the management of CEO Mark Pedowitz, it started to boost its strengths and to single out the most favorable factors of success in the contemporary competitive scenario. Furthermore, it expanded the reach beyond its traditional female-skewing 18- to 34-year-old audience, by kicking off the "Arrowverse", i.e. the cross-series TV multiverse based on some DC Comics' characters.⁴ In the meantime, The CW stressed the strategy of social progressiveness that targets "slumpies" (socially liberal, urban-minded professionals⁵) and ensured brand loyalty "through programming that foregrounded diversity, a fact that distinguishes it from other networks where this representation is often minimal",⁶ it also built a brand-identity based on its own way of addressing specific and engaged audience⁷ and it enhanced its own programming with more sophisticated-looking and narratively complex TV series, finally deemed worth of scrutiny and in-depth analysis by critics and TV taste-makers. In fact, since the rebranding, the critical perception of the network has shifted from a superficial youth-gear channel that aired predominantly WASP, formulaic teen soaps to a more adult, diverse, inclusive and progressive platform that employs some quality television tropes and adapt them to the constraints of free-to-air television — such as series that champion creative innovation through the deconstruction of familiar genres and narrative structures, that are self-conscious, literature-inspired and writer-based, with a fundamental attention to realism and social issues.⁸

In this context, *Riverdale* stands out as something even more particular and worth exploring. As part of The CW's new course, on the audience-design side, it stimulate fan activities and loyalty through a smart management of its characters/stars.⁹ On the form side, it mirrors mentioned narrative complexity and progressive spirit — but with a unique twist: that "complex gymnastic of syntax" that Robert J. Thompson associated with multi-strand storytelling,¹⁰ plays out here on multiple and diverse layers that combine games of pop intertextual references with a high-quality aesthetics borrowed from different cultural domains. This, combined with social relevance, ends up bestowing upon the series an aura of authenticity and overall relevance that seems to overshadow even its most unlikely storylines.

In the following paragraphs, we are going to analyze how these dynamics play out throughout the series.

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4. See Charles Joseph, "The CW Arrowverse and myth-making, or the commodification of transmedia franchising," in *SERIES*, Vol. IV, n. 2 (Winter 2018): 27–45; Maureen Ryan, "The Man Behind the Heroes: Mark Pedowitz Breaks the CW Out of Niche", *Variety* (October 14, 2015), <https://variety.com/2015/tv/features/mark-pedowitz-the-cw-the-flash-arrow-1201617084/>.
 5. See Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).
 6. Mélanie Bourdaa, Claire Cornillon, Shannon Wells-Lassagne, "Investigating The CW. Introduction," *SERIES*, Vol. IV, n. 2 (Winter 2018): 7, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2421-454x/8809>.
 7. Bourdaa, Cornillon, Wells-Lassagne, 6.
 8. Notably, we can find such tropes in the highly-appreciated *Jane the Virgin* (2014–19) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–19), that gained the network multiple awards and nominations. On the tropes of premium quality television employed by the networks, see Paola Brembilla, Lucia Tralli, "With 22 Episodes a Year'. Searching for Quality in U.S. Network Television: the Cases of *The Good Wife*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *Jane the Virgin*," *Comunicazioni Sociali*, 2 (2015): 141–151.
 9. This was already clear to the ad-buyers and press at the 2016 Upfronts in New York City, when they were in line to enter The CW's presentation and found themselves standing opposite of teens amassed outside the building, waiting to see the network's stars streaming in, with a certain preference for *Riverdale*'s young cast. Caroline Framke, "The CW's Fall 2017 Schedule is Unlike Any Other on Broadcast TV", *Vox* (May 18, 2017), <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/5/18/15657562/cw-fall-2017-schedule-black-lightning-dynasty>.
 10. Robert J. Thompson, "Preface," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (London: IB Tauris, 2007), xix.

Timelessly Cool

There is a trend in contemporary audiovisual production to use the past as a trope to build up a nostalgia-effect that fetishizes symbols and objects from a specific era. Just think about *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–), *GLOW* (Netflix, 2017–), *The Goldbergs* (ABC, 2013–): besides being set in the Eighties, these series commodify images of the past with overtly consumable quality and tend to activate what Jonathan Simon has called a “willful nostalgia”, i.e. nostalgia for a past one has glimpsed in films and cultural products, but not actually experienced.¹¹

Riverdale is different. It is clearly set in the present, but the characters seldom use smartphones or engage in activities typical of contemporary teenagers. Their favorite place to meet up is an iconic Fifties diner, they run a Roaring Twenties-inspired speakeasy, they live in old gothic mansions, they dress like characters from classical Hollywood genres and archetypes (we will explore this point in the next paragraph). Even cinematography is inspired by Hollywood cults, from the colorful neon lights of the diners in *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) and *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1988), to the dim lights and dark atmospheres of the Noirs. The merge of a contemporary setting with retro elements and atmospheres creates a sense of timelessness that aim to suspend the audience’s disbelief for what they are seeing and, instead, fascinate them with the retro charm. Therefore, more than nostalgia, it is useful to explore the concepts of *retro* and how the show uses it to stand out. (Fig. 1)



Figure 1: The '50s diner where the characters meet

Fashion Studies and Sociology have analyzed anachronistic dress as anti-fashion to symbolize rebellion and belonging to a subculture and, then again, anachronistic dressing becoming fashionable up to the point of the rising of the mainstream vintage style in youth cultures.¹² For this study, we focus on this later development. Heike Jenss characterizes *retro* as “an all-encompassing catchword” that involves “the construction of past images and historical looks which can be achieved with original objects as well as with new ones that look historic.”¹³ The ability of *retro* to encompass both old and new has led some to characterize “retrochic” as inauthentic and messy, as it blurs clear distinctions between past and present.¹⁴ This is what *Riverdale* does as well, as it employs a retrochic look that consciously defies authenticity by mixing old and new. However, this practice does not translate into bad quality but, on the contrary, it is a crucial part of the series’ success. In fact, it is important to notice that *Riverdale* faces its retro aesthetics with a cool attitude.

11. Jonathan Simon, “They Died with Their Boots On: the Boot Camp and the Limits of Modern Penalty,” *Social Justice*, Vol. 22, n. 2 (Summer 1995): 32. On the nostalgia-effect in contemporary television and media, see *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past On Demand*, Kathryn Pallister, ed. (Lexington Books: Lanham, 2019).
12. For instance, see Sarah Elsie Baker, *Retro Style: Class, Gender and Design in the Home* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000); Angela McRobbie, “Second-hand Dresses and the Role of Rag Market,” in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music*, ed. Angela McRobbie (Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1988): 23–49.
13. Heike Jenss, “Sixties Dress Only! The Consumption of the Past in a Retro Scene,” in *Old Clothes, New Looks: Second-Hand Fashion*, eds. Alexandra Palmer, Hazel Clark (New York: Berg, 2005): 179.
14. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (New York: Verso Press, 1994).

Being "cool" is a polysemic concept. In our case, we borrow a term mainly used in marketing to define a stylish sense of self which is expressed through attitude and fashion game.¹⁵ More precisely, it is a behavioral trope based on a "stylized way of offering resistance that insists more on appearance than on substance [and that] can turn cool people into untouchable objects of desire."¹⁶ We can see how this retro coolness plays out in the narrative of the show, where the aesthetics matches the excessive and unrealistic narrative choices, boosting a self-aware sense of detachment and cool-mindedness about this eccentric weirdness. *Riverdale* is a show that *wants* to be campy, ludicrous, even non-sense at times. Just like its characters, it consciously defies boundaries between old and new to create a new aesthetic of its own, which is nevertheless based on "legitimate" and "authentic" cultural domains and products — like the imagery from old, classic films. The feeling is that a guilty pleasure is being legitimized by the awareness of its production system, which needs *Riverdale* to be that boldly eccentric.

In this context, the characters play an important role in defining the coolness of the show. In *Riverdale*, they are in fact designed as untouchable object of desire, they fascinate the audience through an inherent mysteriousness and ambiguity, they wear statement pieces and stylized outfits that exude that boldness and attitude that may make them not believable (after all, they are still teenagers), but nevertheless admirable and cool. We are now going to focus on the three female leading characters to see how this plays out in practice.

Designing the (Iconic) Girls

Examining the supposed non-authenticity of retrochic, Nancy Fischer argues that the term *vintage* may come to the rescue, as it "represents a semantic attempt to claim authenticity for genuinely old clothing and objects."¹⁷ In fact, she argues, "Rebranding used clothing as scarce and desirable through the moniker 'vintage' is wrapped up in cultural constructions of authenticity and is symbolically deployed in opposition to mass production and standardized shopping experience."¹⁸ Despite the ideal boundaries between mass-manufactured new clothing and old clothing might be based on a false distinction, consumers (and the public opinion) tend to attribute authentic and valuable qualities to vintage clothing.¹⁹ This authenticity discourse is key in understanding the aesthetic relevance of *Riverdale*.

Riverdale reclaims authenticity and credibility in its professional use of actual vintage and second-hand clothing, integrating them with new clothing made to look vintage. Costume designer Rebekka Sorensen-Kjelstrup prides herself in interviews and on her own Instagram account for the research and design process of her team, which plays with retro-style elements and actual vintage pieces — either clothing and accessories, like brooches and gloves. The show puts a spotlight in the "craft", it emphasizes the qualities of its production methods and the expertise of the professionals involved, making them "especially amendable to becoming part of authenticity discourse."²⁰ In so doing, *Riverdale* internalizes this discourse and attributes authentic qualities to itself, combining it with the explicit attention to aesthetic details and its savvy intertextual references.

This attention to aesthetic design, particularly through vintage and retro elements, is relevant in the visual and internal construction of characters. In *Riverdale*, each character is typified by color codes and iconic features such as accessories, signature makeup and hairstyle, and so forth. One of the main results of this design is that each one of them, matching the signature narrative style of the series, embodies a

15. For an example of coolness in TV series, see Paola Brembilla, "Suit Up. The Use of Ready-to-Wear Power Suits in TV Series", in *ZoneModa Journal*, vol. 5 (2016): 32–37.

16. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, "What Does It Mean to Be Cool?", *Philosophy Now* (2010), https://philosophynow.org/issues/80/What_Does_It_Mean_To_Be_Cool.

17. Nancy L. Fischer, "Vintage, the First 40 Years: The Emergence and Persistence of Vintage Style in the United States," *Culture Unbound. Journal of Current Cultural Research*, vol. X (2015): 47.

18. Fischer, 46–47.

19. As Fischer notes, vintage clothing might as well originate from earlier forms of mass production. Fischer, 62.

20. Sharon MacDonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (New York/London: Routledge, 2013): 124.

film genre, an imagery, or a cultural archetype. This is perfectly exemplified by the three main female characters: Betty Cooper, Veronica Lodge and Cheryl Blossom.



Figure 2: Betty Cooper

Betty Cooper, played by Lily Reinhart, typifies the girl-next-door and, as such, she always wears the kind of classic pastel sweater set that was popular in the '50s and '60s. This simple, sweet and down-to-earth style is also conveyed by Betty always having her hair in a high ponytail, a hairstyle that, as her best friend Kevin Keller notices in what has become a catchphrase, is "iconic and beyond reproach". Betty is the perfect student, at least at the beginning of the show, and represents not only the stereotypical blonde and sweet girl-next-door, but also the perfect female lead of a rom-com. It is interesting to notice that, occasionally, she turns to the dark side, when triggered by events or seeking revenge. In such cases, her character is completely reversed as she becomes Dark Betty, wearing a black bob wig and dark, sexy clothes. (Fig. 2)

Veronica Lodge, portrayed by Camila Mendes, is the newcomer from New York City. Her style is based on a posh sensibility adapted to a small-town context — e.g. a small leather satchel doubling as a backpack or an elegant dress with basic heeled-boots. Her signature accessory is a pearl necklace, her colors are black and purple; the result is a classy style with some youthful twists, in a sleek and sophisticated silhouette. Besides some direct citations — like some looks recalling Audrey Hepburn — Veronica mostly embodies the femme fatale, the mysterious woman who drives the plot in noir films. In fact, she is very political and often schemes to stir the storytelling — more explicitly in the noir-theme episode in season 3, *The Red Dahlia*. (Fig. 3)

Cheryl Blossom, played by Madelaine Petsch, loves to be the center of attention and, accordingly, she dresses flashy in a perfect red palette, breaking it with only black and white. Cheryl is extremely confident, powerful and manipulative. Each element in her wardrobe is a statement piece. Most characteristic is her maple tree-tapping outfit, which features a black spider brooch and a vibrant red color that contrasts against the snow of the first episodes, not to mention the glossy red lips she's always sporting to assert her dominance. She is a mean girl in the looks of pin-up, that occasionally redeems herself by standing with the "good guys". But even when she does that and she changes setting, switching from her gothic mansion to the woods to become a caped archer or to get into a motorbike club, she keeps on wearing her iconic red. (Fig. 4)



Figure 3: Veronica Lodge



Figure 4: Cheryl Blossom

Social *Riverdale*: Blurring On- and Off-Screen

We see how *Riverdale* is deeply connected to the contemporary tendencies of storytelling, and highly aware of the relevance of audience engagement. As such, *Riverdale*'s care for aesthetics and cool self-awareness obviously extends outside the screen: targeting teen audiences, it is rooted in the Web and social media environment, and it states its media presence by overflowing into its official social media profiles, as well as into the social media life of the show's cast.

One of the main *Riverdale* communication strategies is the expression of a deep connection between the characters and the actors who play them, through a savvy and effective use of social media. Although each member of the cast has a personal social media existence, once again the three actresses who play the lead female characters offer a particularly relevant example. We are going to focus on their Instagram profiles, and how they negotiate their fictional selves with their star personas, intertwining fashion, personal details, and characters references. We chose to focus on Instagram because of the platform's visual nature, as well as for its mainstream relevance in shaping contemporary celebrities.²¹

Lili Reinhart, Camila Mendes and Madelaine Petsch Instagram profiles undoubtedly embody the typical influential young stars' self-representation, sharing a common ground of fashion shootings, red carpets and pictures from the set. But each one of them can reconnect with *Riverdale* world and values in very personal ways. On Instagram, the three actresses don't explicitly share their political views, but they imply them through expression of support to specific causes, that include LGBTQ rights, body positivity, raising awareness on eating disorders, inviting to vote. Early in the *Riverdale* promotional launch, they also posted captions and screenshots of *Archie Comics*' drawn versions of Betty, Veronica and Cheryl, reframing them as much more feminist and sex positive heroines than their actual depiction in *Archie*'s conservative storylines. These attempts match *Riverdale*'s choice "to both embrace and critique its relationship to a conservative comics past in order to be seen as a bold, feminist narrative."²² Both the show's mood and the actresses' social media attitude can be framed in what Rosalind Gill called postfeminist sensibility,²³ "that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life, which include the emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency as dominant modes of accounting."²⁴ Reinhart, Mendes and Petsch endorse the empowering and postfeminist aspirations of *Riverdale*, through pictures underlining sisterhood as well as the intimate, authentic relationship among cast members; however, it is undeniable that such values are entangled in industrial mandates and commercial partnerships.

The Star and Muse: "@lilireinhart"

Lili Reinhart is active on Instagram since 2012, way before *Riverdale*. She was already an actress but her profile was like those of average teenagers, with pictures of her friends and her little sister, plus images detailing her passion for makeup special effects. Unsurprisingly, this attitude changed after the success of the show. Her first *Riverdale*-themed post is a screenshot that announces her casting as Betty Cooper (February 9, 2016), followed by some images from *Archie* comics. Her romantic involvement both in the show and in real life with her co-star Cole Sprouse/Jughead is a source of effective promotional material as well as a constant wink to the fan-favourite ship "Bughead" (Fig. 5).

21. About Instagram and the phenomenon of influencers and micro-celebrities see Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, Raymond Welling, "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers", *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 8, n. 2 (2017): 191–208; about Instagram credibility and stardom see Elmira Djafarova, Oxana Trofimenkova, "Instafamous' — credibility and self-presentation of micro-celebrities on social media", *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 22, n. 10 (2018): 1432–46.
22. Nicholas E. Miller, "'Now That It's Just Us Girls'. Transmedial Feminisms from *Archie* to *Riverdale*", *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 4, n. 3 (2018): 205–226.
23. See Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture. Elements of a Sensibility", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, n. 2 (2007): 147–166, and Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: a Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, n. 6 (2017): 606–26.
24. Rosalind Gill, "Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times", *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, n. 4 (2016): 613.



Figure 5: Lili Reinhart and Cole Sprouse

Reinhart self-representation through Instagram is also influenced by Cole Sprouse’s side activity as a photographer, through recurring references to an arty, stylish, metropolitan mood (Fig. 6).

In Summer 2019, the rumor of their break-up spread concern among *Riverdale* fans and “Bughead” shippers, only to be soon proved wrong by the two via a joined Instagram post²⁵ which immediately re-established their position as a young power couple.²⁶

On her Instagram feed, Reinhart typically shows support to LGBTQ rights and campaigns, and shares awareness on body positivity through inspirational posts and pictures.

The Fashion Player: “@camimendes”

Camila Mendes Instagram activity starts in May 2016, shortly before the beginning of the *Riverdale* promotion. Her second post already explicitly refers to *Riverdale* through a spontaneous picture of her and her colleagues, apparently taken by co-star Cole Sprouse. The perfect timing of the creation of the account and *Riverdale*’s launching campaign suggests that Mendes’ profile will keep a more professional purpose. Compared to the others, her profile is mostly lifestyle and fashion-oriented, with a clear drive towards promotional contents for the series (Fig. 7).

25. The picture collected over seven million likes and over 163,000 comments, becoming the post with more interactions ever on Lili Reinhart Instagram profile.

26. Sabrina Barr, “*Riverdale* Co-Stars Lili Reinhart and Cole Sprouse Respond to Break-up Rumours”, *The Independent* (July 26 July, 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/dating/lili-reinhart-cole-sprouse-split-break-up-instagram-dating-riverdale-a9021731.html>



Figure 6: Lili Reinhart



Figure 7: Camila Mendes

She has recently reinforced her position as a fashion testimonial through partnerships and sponsored social media contents. As for her private life, she mostly shares pictures with his colleague and real-life partner Charles Melton (Reggie in the show). Although Mendes and Melton’s characters are briefly romantically involved in the series too, the Mendes-Melton couple has not a solid a fanbase as “Bughead”, mainly because they lack the power of the earlier mentioned on/offscreen fanshipping. When it comes to politics, Camila Mendes uses her Instagram profile to advocate for National Eating Disorders Awareness, as well as to endorse political engagement and actively participates to voters registration campaigns (Fig. 8).

The Stylish BFF: “@madelame”

Madelaine Petsch’s first Instagram post is a professional picture from one of her modeling jobs, dated February 27, 2014. Before *Riverdale*, Petsch was already a model and a mildly successful Instagram presence. Like in Lili Reinhart’s case, her first *Riverdale* post is a screenshot that announces her casting as Cheryl Blossom (February 25, 2016). After *Riverdale*’s success, her profile starts to include references to the show and red carpet pictures, as well as sponsored contents from Petsch’s partnerships with fashion and beauty brands. Her Instagram activity also focuses on the celebration of female friendship, expressed by many pictures of her hanging out with her female co-stars (Fig. 9).



Figure 8: Camila Mendes wearing a T-shirt that supports voters' registration



Figure 9: Lili Reinhart, Madelaine Petsch and Camila Mendes, posted by Petsch

Specifically, she often reference the onscreen romantic relationship between her character Cheryl and Vanessa Morgan's character Toni (Fig. 10).



Figure 10: Madelaine Petsch and Vanessa Morgan as “Choni”

Petsch especially underlines her connection to the fans and to the show's world by appropriating the fan ship jargon “Choni”, from the two characters names Cheryl and Toni. Being “Choni” the main same-sex relationship on the show, Petsch's recurring references to the couple gained a particularly relevant value for *Riverdale*'s LGBTQ audience.

Teenage Heaven

Although data analysis has showed over the past years that fewer American young audiences watch television in the traditional way,²⁷ 2017 *Riverdale* season two premiere gained impressive numbers among teenagers, with an increase of almost 500% compared to season one finale,²⁸ and the show has been extremely successful ever since. We are going to explore some possible reasons.

First, The CW shows' availability: thanks to a deal between the network and Netflix, which ended in May 2019,²⁹ the subscription VOD service has been able for years to exclusively stream previous seasons of The CW scripted shows, making new seasons available 8 days after the finale. The agreement allowed The CW's original shows to diversify their distribution modes and therefore to reach new audiences, included the teenagers that distanced themselves from traditional television.

27. Stephen Battaglio, “New TV season ratings show fewer young viewers watching the traditional way”, *The Los Angeles Times* (October 10, 2015), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-tv-ratings-young-audiences-20151011-story.html>.

28. Alison Herman, “Teens Don't Watch TV — So Why Do They Love *Riverdale*?”, *Ringer* (October 18, 2017), <https://www.theringer.com/tv/2017/10/18/16492324/riverdale-season-2-teen-phenomenon>.

29. Julia Alexander, “The CW is ending its Netflix deal, but that doesn't mean *Riverdale* is disappearing”, *The Verge* (May 16, 2019), <https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/16/18628355/cw-netflix-riverdale-arrow-flash-sabrina-batwoman-cbs-warnermedia-att-deal>. However, Alexander reports, “Netflix will continue to receive new seasons of shows that are already on the streaming service”.

Second, as noted by Kaitlyn Tiffany in its analysis of the series, *Riverdale* appears to be particularly suitable for an online fandom, "with musical numbers, mysterious killers, hints about at least a dozen potential romantic pairings, beautiful leads constantly back-lit by neon signage, and a soundtrack pulled directly from Spotify's 'Today's Top Viral Hits,'"³⁰ all of which create a catalogue of shareable dialogues and images, and all sort of giftable moments. Third, *Riverdale* explores teen-appealing themes and topics and promotes issues and values that resonate with the present. Storylines include issues such as slut-shaming, bullying, LGBTQ practices, the benefits of inclusivity, and an idea of friends and peers as a second family, which most of the time appear truer than the real one.

Furthermore, *Riverdale* can be perceived as a summary of teen representation, bolstered by visual and narrative choices. As we stated above, *Riverdale's* uniqueness stands in a sense of timelessness, fostered by the mix of retro and contemporary elements, wrapped in a cool package of stylization and desirability. Therefore, we can argue that the show is characterized by a "vintage cool aesthetics", in the sense that it highlights the transition from a vintage 50's narrative, based on gender stereotypes, comforting storytelling and conservative values, to a cool and contemporary narrative, based on female agency, darker turns and making stereotypes more layered and complex. For instance, the "damsel in distress" trope is sometimes overturn as the male protagonist Archie is put in danger and rescued by the smart and resourceful female characters. As we illustrated above, girls' agency and empowerment issues also match those highlighted in the actresses' public profiles.

Conclusion: A Socio-aesthetic Relevance

Teen success aside, "vintage coolness aesthetics" is appealing for adult audiences too. The overall rework and repurposing of *Riverdale* as a thriller-noir-crime detective story, with a clear *Twin Peaks* vibe and its thematic boldness — that includes serial killers, rape, sexual harassment, mental health issues — attract expert viewers as well as critical scrutiny, which is stimulated by meta-textual references that exceed the borders of teen culture. First, some episode titles refer to old movies that teens would probably not recognize: 1x04 Chapter Four: *The Last Picture Show*; 1x05 *Faster, Pussycats! Kill! Kill!*. Second, some episodes entirely revolve around specific movies famously adapted into musicals, like 2x18 *A Night to Remember*, where the characters reinterpret *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), and 3x18, *Big Fun*, based on *Heathers* (Michael Lehmann, 1988): these cases put together the original 80s movie versions (and books, in the *Carrie* example) with the recent musical adaptations, throwing a sort of intergenerational and intertextual connection. Third, some adult characters are played by actors who were popular in the 80s, 90s and early 00s — like former teen star Molly Ringwald, *Beverly Hills 90210's* Luke Perry, or *Twin Peaks's* Mädchen Amick.

As we argued in the first section, to reach its goal of differentiating itself and level up in the television landscape, The CW renovated its genres through complexity and progressiveness: the network's productions employ sophisticated narratives that raise fan engagement and pay specific attention to issues of diversity and inclusivity. *Riverdale* stays true to the rebranded CW double nature: it is a teen series that fosters fandom through pop references and the actors' social media presence, but at the same time it fits the network's progressive purpose. *Riverdale* uses narrative complexity in a very specific way, pushing genre hybridization (noir, soap opera, melodrama, etc.) and intertextual references to an extreme, sometimes resulting into irresistible nonsense. However, the overall stylistic attention compensates, and even justifies, the weirdness and conscious inauthenticity of the storytelling, while meeting the need to legitimize the series as something more than a regular teen drama.

As we tried to demonstrate through our study, the creative and aesthetic care dedicated to characters' look, combined with genre hybridization, thematic boldness and connections to contemporary relevant topics, demonstrates that *Riverdale's* glossy surface is multidimensional. It can be enjoyed just as it is, because it is consciously beautifully crafted; but it can also foster a playful viewing experience, by

30. Kaitlyn Tiffany, "*Riverdale's* total disregard for narrative sense makes it the most fun show on TV", *The Verge*, (October 12, 2017), <https://www.theverge.com/2017/10/12/16463904/riverdale-season-2-premiere-chapter-fourteen-recap-review>.

reversing stereotypes and using inter/meta textuality. That is why *Riverdale* can be considered as socio-aesthetically relevant: the "vintage cool aesthetics" does not end in itself, but it engages with many more nuances that makes the show one of the most significant in contemporary pop culture.

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Paola Brembilla: Università di Bologna (Italy)

✉ p.brembilla@unibo.it

She is an assistant professor in Serial Narratives and Digital Media at the University of Bologna (Department of the Arts). In 2016, she earned her Ph.D. in Television Studies at the same university, with a thesis on the relations between business strategies and narrative forms in U.S. TV series. She was a visiting fellow at University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2014 and at Oxford Brookes University in 2019, where she also researched Media and Television Economics, Production and Reception Studies, Media Franchises and Vast Narratives. She was a speaker at many international conferences and authored several publications on the relations between TV series economics and aesthetics, including articles, chapters and two books, *Game of Strategy. Analisi strategica del settore delle serie TV nell'industria televisiva statunitense* (2015) and *It's All Connected. L'evoluzione delle serie TV statunitensi* (2018). With Ilaria A. De Pascalis, she edited the Routledge collection *Reading Contemporary Serial Television Universes* (2018).

Chiara Checcaglini: Università degli Studi di Urbino Carlo Bo (Italy)

✉ chiara.checcaglini@uniurb.it

She completed her Ph.D. in Sociology and Communication Studies at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. Her current research interests include media education, transmedia storytelling, film criticism, contemporary serial narratives, their critical reception and their forms of distribution. She wrote essays and presented papers on these topics and she authored the book *Breaking Bad. La chimica del male: storia, temi, stile* (Mimesis 2014). She is teaching assistant of Cinema and Photography at the University of Urbino and she has taught Media Literacy and Transmedia Storytelling at the University of Udine. She has worked with film festivals such as Il Cinema Ritrovato and Premio Sergio Amidei, and she is editor and contributor of several webzines dedicated to film and television criticism.