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# Bohemian Like You: The Construction of Cool Sound Collectives in Serial Television

Florian Groß

Leibniz University Hannover

In 2001, the telecommunications company Vodafone released the television commercial “How Are you?”<sup>1</sup> The one-minute-long spot consists of a fast-cut montage of several scenes which show a succession of young, energetic people that are connected to the world through mobile communication: a woman at a festival, people in urban night life, friends in a limousine, a group of tweens spontaneously diving off a cliff into the ocean, a father switching his office job for a visit to the zoo with his son, teenagers on motor scooters gawking at an attractive woman, a Bohemian party in the countryside, a rescue mission for offshore surfers, and crowds watching a Manchester United home game. In all of these instances, the instant connectivity of (then relatively new) mobile communication seamlessly blends into the active, non-conforming lifestyle of these people—even in a traffic jam, it helps the car passengers to connect with the world outside the gridlock. All of this is accompanied by and expressed through “Bohemian Like You” by Portland-based alternative act The Dandy Warhols.<sup>2</sup> This upbeat rock song extradiegetically supports the commercial’s content and emotive message, both through its music as well as through lyrics that run down a couple of stock elements of modern Bohemia, such as coolness, temp jobs, playing music in bands, or eating vegan food. Notably, both song and montage are interrupted by a scene at the opera, where a ringing cell phone disrupts a ballet performance of *Swan Lake*,<sup>3</sup> annoying the audience and embarrassing the phone’s owner before the clip cuts back to the rock song.

What the song provided for the spot (and brand) was therefore a lively, young image—and subcultural cachet, through its creator as well as sound. As such, it might be considered yet another

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<sup>1</sup> Vodafone, “How Are You?,” television advertisement, 2001. Accessed through YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnZD2A47LbE>>

<sup>2</sup> The Dandy Warhols, “Bohemian Like You,” track 10 on *Thirteen Tales from Urban Bohemia*, Capitol, 2000, compact disc.

<sup>3</sup> Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Swan Lake*, composed in 1875-6.

example of a corporation branding its product as 'young' and 'hip' through the use of alternative (music) culture. This idea of corporate culture co-opting alternative culture for commercial reasons has often been used to explain its attraction for these companies. To a certain extent, this approach certainly applies, as the commercial potential of young, alternative culture for the branding and selling of goods has become an ever-increasing factor in contemporary consumer capitalism.<sup>4</sup> However, the question arises whether this process of co-optation has to be seen in necessarily antagonistic terms. Do we really deal here with capitalist business interests exploiting authentic alternative culture for commercial reasons alone, or is it maybe more accurate to consider them in much more interrelated and co-dependent terms? Read like this, the clip's juxtaposition of alternative and opera music might be more telling concerning the function of alternative culture in this context than a pure focus on questions of co-optation. From the perspective I want to propose in the following, alternative culture defines itself against the established mainstream of cultural spheres such as the opera just as much as it symbolically distances itself from commercialism and mass culture, but it does so concurrently with a late capitalist culture that also increasingly works this way.

Analyzing the interaction between alternative culture and capitalist media culture along these lines allows us to also find accurate answers to the question why alternative music has not only become part of television commercials, but rather a staple element of (serial) television in general. During the last three decades, licensed popular music has evolved into an increasingly conventionalized and commercialized element of television series, and a genre that has been particularly prominent in this regard is the vague entity known as 'independent' or 'alternative' pop and rock. While the idea of co-optation is never far from approaches to this topic, I want to claim that a study of this sonic element of television also benefits from an approach that accounts for the dynamic relationship between alternative 'cool' culture and established 'mainstream' culture in the context of commercial popular culture. The endlessly elusive term 'cool' is both central to my

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell. How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (Chichester: Capstone, 2005).

argument and notoriously difficult term to define. For the purposes of this chapter, I will start from Pountain and Robins' "rough working definition" of cool as "an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals or small groups to express defiance to authority [...] which does not announce itself in strident slogans but conceals its rebellion behind a mask of ironic impassivity."<sup>5</sup> In line with this understanding of cool, this chapter seeks to outline how the series' non-diegetic soundtracks as well as their diegetic representation of music cultures feed into and represent a cultural position whose emphasis on subcultural, non-conformist distinction from 'the mainstream' has become central in contemporary western capitalism and post-industrial middle class-culture.

Through an analysis of the series' general use of alternative rock in their soundtracks as well as close readings of selected scenes, this chapter shows how independent music performs a dual function in serial television: First, its inclusion positions and collectivizes the audience(s) as ideal recipients of this form of culture; second, the producers' conspicuous consumption of subculturally inflected music positions both their serial texts and themselves within this cultural paradigm as well. However, rather than reading this exclusively in terms of commercial mass culture co-opting 'authentic' subcultures, I read the complex interaction between alternative rock and serial television as a reciprocal aesthetic process and negotiation within contemporary capitalism along the lines of 'cool', 'hip,' and 'creativity.' Within television culture, it furthermore adds another dimension to contemporary discourses on "Quality TV." Shows that prominently feature alternative music and culture do more than merely creating and exhibiting a certain kind of improved serial television; in addition, they emphasize the normative layer of 'alternative' stances on mainstream culture as yet another element of heightened 'quality.'

In the following, I approach the social and cultural repercussions of musical representations on television. For this, I want to focus at the way how instances and representations of alternative music in selected television shows negotiate a liminal stance between supposedly antagonistic cultural fields that has become a popular subject position in contemporary consumer culture. As

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<sup>5</sup> Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000): 19.

one representative element of a vastly more complex socio-cultural development, these negotiations stand metonymically for the complexities of indie culture vis-à-vis commercial imperatives. In concrete form, they exemplify the way how alternative music acts always traverse the fine line between staying 'indie' and 'selling out.:' i.e. retaining the oppositional, autonomous cultural stance they supposedly have and sacrificing this separation from mainstream society and culture for the opportunity to make a profit.<sup>6</sup> Following Aslinger's claim that "[t]elevision criticism must wrestle with the industrial norms and cultural connotations of licensed music to more fully understand how licensed tracks mobilize meaning,"<sup>7</sup> I want to approach how alternative music performs this function of creating meaning in a sense that goes beyond specific instances of characterization or narrative and rather enhances and enriches the meaning of a given text as a whole. Moreover, I want to outline how the cultural politics of "Quality TV"-series and their collective (aural) address rely to a considerable part on a cultural positioning that is associated with elements of subcultural spheres—and therefore hope to come up with more precise answers concerning their cultural and commercial appeal.

### Cool, Creativity, Capitalism

Since the 1990s, several studies have made the claim that a particular combination of artistic innovation and cultural subversion have become potent drivers of a mode within consumer capitalism that thrives on difference, individuality, and non-conformity. Here, especially Thomas Frank's book *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) and its concept of "hip consumerism" is crucial for the argument I want to make.<sup>8</sup> In this study, Frank identifies developments in postwar US business and consumer culture that have created a "a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Z. Newman, "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," *Cinema Journal* 48.3 (Spring 2009): 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Aslinger, "Nip/Tuck: Popular Music," in *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool. Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, connected to the counterculture of the sixties, the cultural critique of mass society and consumerism spilled over into the broader culture and laid the foundation for ever-new forms of consumption that are defined as a consumer-critical stance, yet still revolve around the act of consumption. Frank’s crucial take on the matter, however, is to show how this was not (only) a cynical business scheme created by Madison Avenue to trick unwitting consumers in ever-more purchases, but rather a sentiment that also resonated within American business culture. In his study, Frank shows how—similar to the way the Beats and later the counterculture rebelled against conformist postwar America—young advertising executives rebelled against the ossified hierarchies and stifling conventions of corporate America in their own capitalist field.<sup>10</sup>

Frank’s study focuses on developments in the advertising and menswear industries of the 1960s, but he identifies a resurgence of this kind of consumption since the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> One of his primary examples in this matter is the music industry. In the article “Alternative to What?,” Frank polemically outlines how the music industry ‘discovered’ subcultural forms of guitar rock during the Grunge explosion and Second Wave of Punk Rock and used them as viable commercial vehicles. For Frank, “[t]here are few spectacles corporate America enjoys more than a good counterculture, complete with hairdos of defiance, dark complaints about the stifling ‘mainstream,’ and expensive accessories of all kinds. [...] New soundtracks, new product design, new stars, new ads. ‘Alternative,’ they call it. Out with the old, in with the new.”<sup>12</sup> While certainly less nuanced than Frank’s overall approach, this sneering quote nevertheless captures the central dynamic between alternative and mainstream cultures, a dynamic whose dialectic is at once more complex and less antagonistic than any binary juxtaposition may make it seem. What Frank describes as an elaborate history of the complex process behind what is commonly associated with terms such as

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<sup>9</sup> Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Frank, “Alternative to What?,” 1993, in *Commodify Your Dissent. Salvos from The Baffler*, ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1997), 145.

'selling out' or 'co-optation' has subsequently become one of most central aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer capitalism: the increasing popularity, especially in so-called "creative industries" and the subject and consumer positions related to this, to define oneself in contrast to 'the mainstream.'<sup>13</sup>

Frank's approaches to U.S. consumer culture have proven to be very influential—either directly or indirectly—for more recent critical accounts of alternative culture and coolness in the context of consumer capitalism. For instance, in *The Rebel Sell* (2005), Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter outline how various multinational companies and brands use this dynamic to engender increased consumption in otherwise saturated markets.<sup>14</sup> Next to more specific analyses of consumer culture, this approach can also be found in recent sociological studies of creativity, which are particularly rich in this regard. Starting with the rather celebratory coinage of a "creative class" by urbanist Richard Florida, and next to studies such as Jim McGuigan's *Cool Capitalism* (2009), several studies have appeared that outline how the development identified by Frank, Heath and Potter, and McGuigan has become a widespread phenomenon that increasingly defines Western capitalism in general.<sup>15</sup> According to these studies, aspiring to a non-conforming, irreverent, individualistic, and at the same time cultural productive subject position is as structurally relevant for producers of goods, services, and ideas as it is for consumers. However, it has become something that is not only aspired to in contemporary culture, but even facilitated, rewarded, and demanded by advanced capitalist societies. In his study *The Invention of Creativity* (2012/2017), German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has defined the central element of this development as the "creativity dispositif."<sup>16</sup> According to Reckwitz, subjects living and working in times of "aesthetic capitalism" are increasingly oriented towards the production and experience of new cultural forms and practices. These new forms of culture are marked by highly aestheticized signs of newness, difference, and defiance, a development that has made this kind of cool creativity become a Foucauldian dispositif

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<sup>13</sup> Writing this chapter during the Trump presidency of course adds a whole different connotation to the idea of going against the grain of the mainstream. While there are indeed interesting resonances between these two discourses, I do not have the space here to analyze them at this point.

<sup>14</sup> Heath and Potter, *The Rebel Sell*.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity*, 2012, trans. by Steven Black (London: Polity Press, 2017), 5.

in its own right.<sup>17</sup> 'Being creative' in the sense of being individualistically, autonomically culturally productive is not only a subjective and collective desire, but also a social and cultural imperative—for everyone. In Reckwitz's words: "In late modern times, creativity embraces a duality of the wish to be creative and the imperative to be creative, subjective desire and social expectations. We want to be creative and we ought to be creative."<sup>18</sup> Simply—and only slightly hyperbolically—put: From the point of view suggested by Reckwitz, it has become inconceivable for people living in Western late capitalist societies to not want to be creative. I want to use this pervasive understanding of the role of 'cool' and creative culture in contemporary society to analyze how alternative music is used across a variety of recent television shows.

### The Alternative Soundtrack of Serial Television

From singer-songwriter to punk and from indie pop to neo folk, guitar-oriented music with subcultural appeal has become a prominent element of the televisual soundscapes since the 1990s, as even a cursory glance shows: Death Cab for Cutie and other indie acts are not only featured as extradiegetic music, but also physically enter the stage within the diegesis of *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007),<sup>19</sup> a character listens to punk rock band Hot Water Music on *One Tree Hill* (The WB/The CW 2003-2012),<sup>20</sup> The Dandy Warhols provide the theme song for *Veronica Mars* (UPN/The CW, 2004-2007),<sup>21</sup> a song by indie folk group The Decemberists appears on the soundtrack of period drama *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015),<sup>22</sup> and *Californication* (Showtime, 2007-2014) even features the title of an album by the alternative rock superstars Red Hot Chili Peppers in its very name.<sup>23</sup> Particularly

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<sup>17</sup> Often referred to as an "apparatus," Foucault's elusive concept is used by Reckwitz to describe something that "is not merely an institution, a closed functional system, a discourse or a set of values," but rather describes a socially and historically specific cultural formation that combines all of these elements and forces and "disposes people to a certain way of being." Reckwitz, *Invention of Creativity*, 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> Reckwitz, *Invention of Creativity*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *The O.C.*, season 2, episode 20, "The O.C. Confidential," directed by Tony Wharmby, featuring Adam Brody, Mischa Barton, and Ben McKenzie. Aired on April 21, 2005, FOX. Warner Home Video, 2005, DVD.

<sup>20</sup> *One Tree Hill*, season 1, episode 4, "Crash Into You," directed by David Carson, featuring Hilarie Burton, Chad Michael Murray, and James Lafferty. Aired October 14, 2003, The WB. Warner Home Video, 2005, DVD.

<sup>21</sup> The Dandy Warhols, "We Used to Be Friends," track 2 on *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Capitol, 2003, compact disc.

<sup>22</sup> Decemberists, "The Infanta," track 6 on *Retrospective: the Music of Mad Men*, Republic Records, 2015, compact disc.

<sup>23</sup> Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Californication*, Warner Bros., 1999, compact disc.



the teen drama *The O.C.* was associated with the promotion of a particular kind of music, and it is through a closer look at this show that I want to develop possible explanations for and functions of alternative music on recent serial television. The use of sound and music in television is of course highly diverse and ranges from the creation of certain moods and for character development, narrative, atmosphere, merchandising/cross-promotion—but in this case also, for the lack of a better term, cultural politics.

In this regard, *The O.C.* is a fitting example due to a number of reasons. First, it features copious amounts of licensed music and primarily relies on 1990s and early 2000 alternative rock by bands such as Phantom Planet, Death Cab for Cutie, Nada Surf, Rooney, and many more. Next to its extradiegetic use of alternative rock music, it also features actual performances by bands from this genre. While the show's first season only includes a single concert performance by Rooney,<sup>24</sup> the show's second season introduces the location of the Bait Shop, a concert venue on the Newport Pier where several prominent bands appear (e.g. The Killers, Modest Mouse, The Walkmen, Death Cab for Cutie, The Subways, Rachel Yamagata). Given its heavy use of alternative music, it is no surprise that the series also served as a vehicle for the promotion of new releases by bands such as the Beastie Boys, who debuted their single "Ch-Check it Out" in the first season episode "The Strip."<sup>25</sup> Out of this prominent and consistent use of popular music, no less than six official soundtrack compilations were released between 2004 and 2006.<sup>26</sup>

Second, through its "music supervisor" Alexandra Patsavas, it featured a prominent creative figure that went on to work in a number of further television series and films (most notably among them: *Mad Men*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Twilight*, *Gossip Girl*). There, she continued to implement her particular—and increasingly recognizable—choice of music and thus extended this influence well

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<sup>24</sup> *The O.C.*, season 1, episode 15, "The Third Wheel," directed by Sandy Smolan, featuring Adam Brody, Mischa Barton, and Ben McKenzie. Aired January 7, 2004, FOX. Warner Home Media, 2004, DVD.

<sup>25</sup> Beastie Boys, "Ch-Check it out," track 1 on *To the 5 Boroughs*, Capitol, 2004, compact disc.

<sup>26</sup> Various Artists, *Music from The O.C.: Mix 1-6*, Warner Bros, 2004-6. For a more detailed account how transmedia phenomena like this feed into contemporary "convergence culture," see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

over and beyond the show itself.<sup>27</sup> Beyond this matter of influence, though, another aspect is the liminal status of *The O.C.*; while its status as a self-consciously aware, at times metafictional prime-time show with high production values and A-list personnel such as actor Peter Gallagher, director Doug Liman, and producer McG makes it compatible with contemporary notions of 'Quality TV,' the fact that it belongs to the rather denigrated genre of the teen drama and was broadcast by the Fox network makes it a more ambivalent candidate in this regard. As such, its use of alternative music highlights and intensifies cultural debates on the 'selling out' of a supposedly anti-commercial music scene—after all, if you are featured on something so obviously commercialized as a teen drama series on a private network, people will irrevocably doubt your alternative status.<sup>28</sup> Emily Zemler has described this as "The O.C. effect," when a band such as Death Cab for Cutie appear in "Fox's *The O.C.*, a show whose characters may be a bit trashy but whose writers seem to have impressive musical taste. This sudden upsurge of music that is—gasp!—considered to be good in the eyes of elitist hipsters and rock critics alike is surprising, proving extremely beneficial to bands like the Shins and Death Cab for Cutie in terms of exposure—and cold hard cash. It seems like a winning formula for all parties involved, except for the original fans, who smell sell out.<sup>29</sup> Somewhere in-between gaining exposure, increasing record sales, selling out, and relinquishing creative control to television executives who use alternative music for their serial texts, Zemler argues, lie the potential pitfalls and benefits for the bands themselves. But what about the other side, i.e. the show's themselves?

In its own negotiation of this debate on alternative music in commercial culture, the show follows a similar path. For instance, in the show's second episode, three characters discuss their musical tastes. Ryan Atwood (Ben McKenzie), a kid from the wrong side of the tracks, has just

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<sup>27</sup> Dorian Linskey, "How *The O.C.* Saved Music," *The Guardian*. December 1, 2004. <<https://www.theguardian.com/arts/features/story/0,11710,1363852,00.html>>

<sup>28</sup> Are there examples for commercialization strategies in the series that you could highlight? Obvious product placements or cross-selling or anything else that highlights the "I am wearing a Che Guevara T-Shirt by brand xyz to critique capitalism" paradox? FG: I could certainly do that, but chose to go into a slightly different direction and refer to Zemler here – is that also okay? If not, I am happy to provide a couple of examples from the show!

<sup>29</sup> Emily Zemler, "The O.C. Effect," *Popmatters*, January 13, 2005. <<https://www.popmatters.com/050114-indiesoundtracks-2496102955.html>>

arrived in wealthy Newport Beach, while the nerdy outsider Seth Cohen (Adam Brody) and the popular girl Marissa Cooper (Mischa Barton) may have been living next door to each other since birth, but the latter has so far been hardly aware of the former's existence. On a drive back home, the following conversation unfolds:

Ryan: "What kind of music do you listen to?"

Marissa: "Right now, punk."

Seth: "Yeah, I am sorry, but Avril Lavigne doesn't count as punk."

Marissa: "Oh yeah? Well, what about The Cramps? Stiff Little Fingers? The Clash? Sex Pistols?"

Seth: "I listen to the same music as Marissa Cooper? I think I have to kill myself."<sup>30</sup>

This dialogue tells us a lot about the points I want to make here. First, music emerges as an important marker of adolescent/young adult identity. Second, through the character of Seth Cohen, *The O.C.* expresses a cultural binary in which it is highly improbable that the beautiful and supposedly shallow Marissa listens to something as culturally profound as punk rock. If at all, supposedly commercialized and watered down 'sell out' versions of this 'authentic,' traditionally 'independent' and 'alternative' kind of popular music are conceivable as the music of choice for her. Then, however, comes the surprise for both Seth and the audience, both of which were ignorant so far that Marissa could be any more than the popular girl living next door. United by the series' activation of cultural dichotomies along the lines of mainstream and alternative and the belief that someone like Marissa would never listen to punk or other forms of cool alternative culture, both learn in this scene that she is aware of and refers to classic idols of the genre.<sup>31</sup> This, however, does not create an affirmative reaction, but rather utter dismay on the side of Seth, who

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<sup>30</sup> *The O.C.*, season 1, episode 2, "The Model Home," directed by Doug Liman, featuring Adam Brody, Mischa Barton, and Ben McKenzie. Aired on August 12, 2003, FOX. Warner Home Video, 2004, DVD.

<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, it is of course necessary to point out the irony of the Sex Pistols in this regard; while they have become one of the central icons of 1970s punk and origin point of the genre, they were nevertheless from the start much more of a cunning exploitation of the scene than an 'authentically' subcultural phenomenon. Therefore, one could argue that the tensions I am outlining here were part of punk rock from its inception.

obviously fears that the possessive—and to a certain extent very gendered—exclusivity of his musical taste is threatened. In this regard, the choice of Avril Lavigne instead of, say, Good Charlotte or Blink-182 is telling. All of these artists stand for a popular version of 1990s punk that has often been accused of being hardly more than a cheap sell-out, yet the one referred to by Seth to disparage a girl's musical taste is conspicuously female. Therefore, with curiously gendered undertones, this scene emphasizes a larger point the series is at pains to drive home from the start: Seth Cohen is the sole true avatar of alternative culture. As the audience had already learned from the posters in his bedroom, Seth is a fan of alternative and independent music, with posters of bands such as Alkaline Trio or Ramones hanging on his walls. This, however, is celebrated at the same time that it is questioned and negotiated by scenes such as the one quoted above. Next to the fact that Seth is depicted as a band shirt-wearing, comic book-collecting, and skateboard-driving character, this scene emphasizes the kind of cultural dichotomy that the series both represents and perpetuates at the same time that it problematizes its central tenet of mutual exclusivity.

Ironically enough, though, while the show's soundtrack does lean heavily towards guitar-oriented music, actual punk rock as such plays only a minimal role here. Rather, it is a specific kind of singer-songwriter and indie music that is virtually omnipresent in the series. Ben Aslinger uses the term "sonic fingerprint" to describe the specific aural style of a given series, and *The O.C.*'s sonic fingerprint is certainly identifiable as 'indie'.<sup>32</sup> In the show, this prominent, and also heavily commodified use of this kind of popular music is juxtaposed with a deprecatory representation of ostentatious wealth and rampant consumerism, therefore notably distancing itself from two basic aspects of the contemporary teen drama that have been fundamental elements since its inception through *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000).<sup>33</sup> In *The O.C.*, the gated communities of Newport Beach, California, lavish mansions and standardized "McMansions" are inhabited by financial traders, lawyers, and real estate brokers, and the children of these people attend a private high

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<sup>32</sup> Aslinger, "Nip/Tuck," n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Rachel Moseley, "The Teen Series," in *The Television Genre Book*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI Publishing, 2008), 53-54.

school—but the show’s resident alternative character Seth Cohen openly despises them. Significantly enough, next to the gendered elements outlined above, this is also related to matters of class. As an inhabitant of Newport Beach, Seth Cohen comes from a privileged background and therefore has the opportunity to despise the crass materialism he is surrounded by—and which he can take for granted. Ryan, on the other hand, is introduced as the ‘kid from the wrong side of the tracks.’ While his reaction to upper class living ranges from amused puzzlement to fisticuffs, he is shown to be much less antagonistic to the life it can provide for those living it. This difference is even emphasized by expressions of musical taste—while Seth listens to ‘cool’ 2000s alternative rock, lower class Ryan is introduced as being a fan of ‘uncool’ 1980s hard rock and bands such as Journey. This binary opposition, however, is once more problematized during the course of the series: In the first season episodes “The Escape,” Seth and his eventual girlfriend Summer fight over the music playing on the car radio and Seth closes the argument by shouting “Do not insult Death Cab!”<sup>34</sup> Half a season later, during another car ride and in a curious reiteration of this scene that established Seth’s musical taste in very vocal terms, Ryan forbids other car passengers to make fun of his musical taste in a very similar fashion: “Do not insult Journey!”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, while Ryan’s class-bound musical taste might still be lacking in relation to the series’ sonic fingerprint, his self-aware echoing of Seth’s declaration exhibits a degree of ironic detachment that makes the difference between the two much less pronounced than they are initially made out to be. Fittingly, over the course of four seasons, and in close relation to Ryan outgrowing both his socio-cultural background as well as original musical taste, he increasingly becomes a more ironic, self-aware—in short cool—character.

In effect, with the *The O.C.*, we are dealing with a lavish soap opera that includes its own detractors in its narrative, and sound plays an instrumental role in the series’ act of distancing. In the words of Faye Woods:

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<sup>34</sup> *The O.C.*, season 1, episode 7, “The Escape,” directed by Sanford Bookstaver, featuring Adam Brody, Mischa Barton, and Ben McKenzie. Aired September 16, 2003, FOX. Warner Home Media, 2004, DVD.

<sup>35</sup> *The O.C.*, season 1, episode 21, “The Goodbye Girl,” directed by Patrick Norris, featuring Adam Brody, Mischa Barton, and Ben McKenzie. Aired March 3, 2004, FOX. Warner Home Media, 2004, DVD.

The programme draws on elements of *Dynasty's* prime-time soap camp and excess in its depiction of Newport society, yet works to contrast this world with its protagonists. Presented as 'authentic' outsiders, Seth and Ryan view this society through a self-aware, slightly mocking distance. However, the emotive portions of *The O.C.'s* soundscape – plaintive indie-rock, new folk or singer-songwriter – allow music to provide the emotional connectivity that its playfully ironic pose could potentially deny. As a result, the programme allows a dual level of engagement for its audience, who could revel in the 'knowing' soap opera plotting and the boys' witty banter, yet at the same time be drawn to the emotional realism of its musical moments.<sup>36</sup>

With respect to the relation between televisual music and serial narration, Faye Woods has used the example of *The O.C.* to illustrate how popular music can function both as identity marker and storytelling tool. Its indie soundtrack in connection to the show's representation and negotiation of alternative culture serves a dual function here; on the one hand, it allows for producers and audience alike to create a cultural niche beyond the supposed mainstream—of the culture it is created in as well as the televisual genre it originated from. While this is hardly ever an unambiguous endeavor which is discursively problematized and commercially exploited by the series at the same time, it nevertheless forms the backbone of the series in terms of identification—at least for all those viewers who expect something different from a teen drama than the endless display of the romantic adventures and conspicuous consumption of supernaturally beautiful characters. Equally ambivalent is the storytelling function served by alternative music in *The O.C.*: On the one hand, its signification of difference is crucial to the show's attempt to distinguish itself from 'standard' teen fare and thus create novelty in an established genre. On the other hand, the emotional, often enough outright sentimental quality of indie music does indeed do more than merely providing a

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<sup>36</sup> Faye Woods, "Storytelling in Song: Television Music, Narrative and Allusion in *The O.C.*," in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, ed. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), n.p.

contrapuntal 'indie' soundtrack to its 'mainstream' romantic plots; in several instances, the extradiegetic songs amplify the series' melodramatic effect.

Woods also highlights how the show's recurrent use of popular songs as leitmotifs within individual episodes create "a playfully reflexive relationship between narrative, soundscape, and audience."<sup>37</sup> Across episodes, Woods argues that Jeff Buckley's version of "Hallelujah" (originally written and performed by Leonard Cohen)<sup>38</sup> introduces a "series leitmotif" that relies on repeating variation within the series: "Its use draws on the track's cultural connotations of melancholic indie credibility, yet also accumulates resonance within the narrative, developing musical meaning beyond individual moments and episodes to span the programme as a narrative whole."<sup>39</sup> I want to connect the two aspects juxtaposed here by Woods, namely the "indie credibility" and its accumulating effect across serial texts. While the emphasis on narrative is less pronounced here, the recurrent effect of the use of popular music that is culturally connotated as 'indie' or 'alternative' has considerable effects and repercussions in the series as such. One important element consists of the way how the show creates the possibility to appeal to audiences that would normally not watch teen drama and reward this kind of collective through the repeated inclusion of music that matches their tastes. Another, related element is the serial creation of newness, which in my opinion works in a very specific way here and further explains the attraction of alternative music to television series. In "Alternative to What?", Thomas Frank claims that "[t]he culture industry is drawn to 'alternative' by the more general promise of finding the eternal new, of tapping the very source of the fuel that powers the great machine."<sup>40</sup> Read along these lines, the use of alternative music provides the series with a 'fresh' take on an established genre by self-reflexively critiquing basic elements of the genre through supposedly antagonistic cultural stances and tastes. This is relevant insofar as serial texts, both within their narratives, but even more importantly in relation to other, preceding or simultaneously released texts, always seek out novelty, but in a highly

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<sup>37</sup> Woods, "Storytelling," n.p.

<sup>38</sup> Jeff Buckley, "Hallelujah," track 6 on *Grace*, Columbia, 1994, compact disc.

<sup>39</sup> Woods, "Storytelling," n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Frank, "Alternative to What?," 151-152.

repetitive formal structure. More precisely, as critics such as Kelleter or Mayer have shown, seriality is marked by varying repetition, and one possibility of variation in repetition is the association of serial texts and genres with different cultural fields.

To approach this, I want to draw on another aspect that has become increasingly important in television studies since the 1990s. Associated with prime cable channels such as HBO and Showtime and an increasing amount of critically acclaimed network dramas, the term Quality TV has become virtually synonymous with a normative increase in production value and critical acclaim that supposedly differentiates this kind of serial television during the “post-network era” from previous instances of TV.<sup>41</sup> On the surface, alternative and independent cultures do not play a role in the context of Quality TV, at least not in the specific sense outlined above. However, the central artistic negotiations that can be identified with respect to this discourse share common ground and—in their emphasis on transgressive artistic expression in close relation with commercial success—are especially fitting with respect to Reckwitz’s *creativity dispositif*. While countless studies on Quality TV have appeared since Thompson’s initial study,<sup>42</sup> his basic list of characteristics still works well as a condensed summary of his most central ideas. In effect, his claim that the “not regular TV”-quality he attributes to Quality TV juxtaposes mass culture and more authentic forms of popular culture in a manner similar to alternative culture’s rejection of ‘the mainstream.’<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Thompson’s emphasis on the “noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and non-appreciative audiences” by the creative personnel that produces this kind of TV echoes creative culture’s image of mainstream culture.<sup>44</sup>

Some critics have read Quality TV in relation to Bourdieu’s theory of distinction as the televisual version of the expression of upper and lower class through the associated taste formations along

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<sup>41</sup> Robert J. Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age. From Hill Street Blues to ER.* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized.* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> As a matter of fact, the term was initially coined by Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi in 1984, but received widespread critical attention only after the publication of Thompson’s study and its adaptation of the concept. See Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds. *MTM ‘Quality Television.’* (London: BFI Publishing, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson *Television’s Second Golden Age*, 14.



the lines of 'high' and 'low'.<sup>45</sup> However, in relation to the cultural theory outlined above, I want to suggest a slightly different focus. From the perspective I want to propose here, many Quality TV-series represent a different, less vertically stratified and less economically deterministic form of distinction. Similar to the Vodafone commercial, and in close relation to cool culture's wary stance on elite and respectable society,<sup>46</sup> these series distance themselves as much from uniform mass culture as they do from 'old' forms of high culture. The culprit here is not consumption per se, but rather forms of consumption that do not give the individual enough space for individual expression—and one of the prime venues through which this is expressed is music, both as an element to create and express this kind of distinction as well as a cultural phenomenon through which the series can self-reflexively negotiate their own complicity. While this has become a prominent (upper) middle class imaginary, its identity with class positions is less pronounced than in orthodox Bourdieuan approaches. At the same time, its congruence with the alternative/mainstream divide is striking and reaches far beyond a single televisual text.

#### In Lieu of a Conclusion: An Outlook

With *The O.C.*, I have focused on a case study that belongs to the genre of the teen drama. However, I want to argue that this phenomenon goes well beyond this specific televisual genre. Even though the negotiation of alternative music on TV certainly plays a crucial role in teen dramas and may be the televisual origin for the function I want to stress here, it is by now only one of many instances in this regard. Therefore, by way of a conclusion, I will briefly introduce two other examples that illustrate how these instances are evident throughout the (by now increasingly defunct) TV schedule.

One such example is the prime cable dramedy *Californication* (Showtime, 2007-2015). In this show about Hank Moody (David Duchovny), a struggling and at the same time conspicuously cool

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television. Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 6-11.

<sup>46</sup> Pountain and Robins, *Cool Rules*, 60-67.

author in Los Angeles, alternative culture is an important part of the series' representation of (its own) creativity. When Hank's agent and best friend Charlie Runkle (Evan Handler) tries to revive the languishing career of Rick Springfield (played by himself), he has one thing in mind: "First, we get you some indie-cred. Let's find you your Wrestler, like Mickey Rourke."<sup>47</sup> Runkle's rather professional seeking of "indie-cred" for an obviously uncool artist is telling here insofar as *Californication* does very much the same, and does so in a significantly open fashion. Overall, similar to *The O.C.*, and already evident from the Red Hot Chili Peppers allusion in the show's title, alternative (music) culture plays an important role in the series' construction of creative culture on TV. Moreover, many of Hank's books are named after albums by thrash metal icons Slayer (*God Hates Us All*, *South of Heaven*), and the episode that features a lengthy flashback detailing how Hank met his on-off girlfriend Karen (Natascha McElhone) and how she became pregnant is called "In Utero,"<sup>48</sup> after Nirvana's final album. The morning that Karen finds out that she is expecting a child, she learns of Kurt Cobain's suicide while we listen to the album's lead single "Heart-Shaped Box."<sup>49</sup>

Through elements like these, the high profile television show *Californication* uses alternative culture in its serial text to both signify difference from the mainstream and broaden its appeal at the same time that it lays bare its motivation for doing so. Newman has shown how alternative and indie cultures are instrumental in the construction of "an authentic, autonomous alternative to mainstream media," yet frequently complicit in its commercial appeal.<sup>50</sup> Similar to *The O.C.*, *Californication* makes use of this effect to symbolically distinguish the series, its creative hero(es) and its creative team from the mainstream. In the case of *Californication*, the representation of contemporary alternative culture goes hand in hand with frequent allusions and visual cues that evoke the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The fact that *Californication*'s creator Tom

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<sup>47</sup> *Californication*, season 3, episode 3, "Verities & Balderdash," directed by Davin Von Ancken, featuring David Duchovny, Natascha McElhone, and Pamela Adlon. Aired October 11, 2009, Showtime. Showtime, 2010, DVD.

<sup>48</sup> *Californication*, season 2, episode 10, "In Utero," directed by Davin Von Ancken, featuring David Duchovny, Natascha McElhone, and Pamela Adlon. Aired November 30, 2008, Showtime. Showtime, 2009, DVD.

<sup>49</sup> Nirvana, "Heart-Shaped Box," track 3 on *In Utero*, DGC, 1993, compact disc.

<sup>50</sup> Newman, "Indie Culture," 16.

Kapinos used to be on the writing staff of Dawson's Creek may be yet another indicator that this form of youth culture has its televisual roots in the teen drama genre but has become as much a part of general serial television as youth culture in general has become a central element and trajectory of contemporary capitalist culture.

Another example is the period drama *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015). This show about the advertising industry in the 1960s was often hailed for its historical accuracy and meticulous reconstruction of American life in this decade. Significantly enough, one crucial element of the series is its depiction of the transformation that took place in US business and consumer culture; essentially, the series can be read as an indirect representation/adaptation of Thomas Frank's study.<sup>51</sup> Next to historical events, social mores, and set design, the show's celebrated historical authenticity also included its soundtrack, which primarily consists of extradiegetic period pieces. However, sometimes the show deviated from this by anachronistically including song selections from its own historical production context. The first instance of this was The Cardigans' 1997 alternative pop song "Great Divide"<sup>52</sup> in the show's second episode "Ladies Room."<sup>53</sup> The instance I am primarily interested in, however, occurs at the beginning of the second season episode "Maidenform."<sup>54</sup> In this episode's opening montage, the song "The Infanta"<sup>55</sup> by alternative folk band The Decemberists accompanies a three-part scene in which we see three of the show's female protagonists getting dressed in front of mirrors. Introducing an episode that follows these women's different gender-related trajectories in the 1960s, the song's upbeat tempo signifies a feeling of departure, while the song's lyrics about the celebrated arrival of an infant princess echo the gender-related theme of the episode. As such, it vaguely echoes the episode's theme as much as the

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<sup>51</sup> See also Kate Edenborg, "Going Groovy or Nostalgic: *Mad Men* and Advertising, Business, and Social Movements," in *Mad Men and Politics. Nostalgia and the Remaking of Modern America*, ed. Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> The Cardigans, "Great Divide," track 10 on *First Band on the Moon*, Stockholm Records, 1996, compact disc.

<sup>53</sup> *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 2, "Ladies Room," directed by Alan Taylor, featuring Jon Hamm, Elizabeth Moss, and January Jones. Aired July 26, 2007, AMC. Lionsgate, 2008, DVD.

<sup>54</sup> *Mad Men*, season 2, episode 6, "Maidenform," directed by Phil Abraham, featuring Jon Hamm, Elizabeth Moss, and January Jones. Aired August 31, 2008, AMC. Lionsgate, 2009, DVD.

<sup>55</sup> The Decemberists, "The Infanta," track 1 on *Picaresque*, Kill Rock Stars, 2005, compact disc.

Cardigans' song did in the show's second episode, where the audience witness an early instance of the "Great Divide" between the series' protagonist Don Draper and his wife.

While these aspects arguably play an important role in the show's usage of (modern) songs, I want to stress another element. To put it in Woods' terms: Next to a storytelling tool, music functions here as an identity marker as well. In this regard, I think that it is significant that in Charlie Wells' account of *Mad Men's* musical anachronisms, he opens the section on "The Infanta" as follows: "Hipsters loved this emphatic juxtaposition when it opened a mid-second-season episode on white-versus-black, Jackie-versus-Marilyn brassieres".<sup>56</sup> While he continues to dive into the possible textual and sonic resonance between the song and the scene/episode, he does not go into further detail why it appealed so much to 'hipsters'. For this, a little bit of context on the band might be necessary. The Decemberists were founded in 2000 in Portland, Oregon and are known for their 1960s folk revival-inflected version of alternative rock. The band's musical aesthetics are characterized by opulent arrangements and whimsical lyrics, and they have become one of the staples of contemporary independent music in the United States. Together with the fact that Portland—where not only The Decemberists, but also The Dandy Warhols originated—is one of the nation's hotbeds of alternative culture, the connotations of the selection become more apparent.

This reference to contemporary alternative culture, however, once more gains a more ambiguous quality if juxtaposed with the series' representation of 1960s counterculture. While *Mad Men* is often read as an indictment of the proverbial 'Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,' its depiction of Beats culture is even less flattering. In the first season episode "Babylon,"<sup>57</sup> *Mad Men's* protagonist Don Draper visits the Gaslight Café and encounters a number of countercultural characters who are, above all, even more self-absorbed and pretentious than himself. In fact, juxtaposed with overtly earnest

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<sup>56</sup> Charlie Wells, "'Mad Men' Is Set in the '60s, So Why Does It Use Music From Today?" *The Atlantic*. June 8, 2012. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/06/mad-men-is-set-in-the-60s-so-why-does-it-use-music-from-today/258222/>>

<sup>57</sup> *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 6, "Babylon," directed by Andrew Bernstein, featuring Jon Hamm, Elizabeth Moss, and January Jones. Aired August 23, 2007, AMC. Lionsgate, 2008, DVD.

Beatnik's, the ironically detached advertising executive Draper emerges as the only truly cool character here. In the end, the scene segues from a folk band's performance of "Waters of Babylon," at the Gaslight into the episode's closing montage that transposes the song's lyrical message of being lost to other main characters of the show. Overall, this scene illustrates how *Mad Men* is yet another show that appeals to cool culture by prominently featuring alternative culture—without necessarily celebrating it uncritically—and simultaneously depicting it(self) as something 'different' from the mainstream—yet not necessarily something outside of it.

Significantly enough, with Alexandra Patsavas, *Mad Men* featured the same music supervisor as *The O.C.*, as well as numerous other shows (e.g. *Grey's Anatomy*) and films (*Twilight*) that featured an indie-soundtrack. Therefore, a closer look at these texts will provides us with further instances of the construction of alternative, 'cool' culture as a collective realm through which it is possible—for television creators, audiences, and musical artists alike—to symbolically escape and oppose mainstream culture at the same time that this action is negotiated and problematized. However, this phenomenon is neither limited to the creative influence of Patsavas, nor is it restricted to explicitly youth-oriented genres, but has rather become a wide-spread element of contemporary Quality TV in general.

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