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We're on This Road Together: The Changing Fan/ Producer Relationship in Television as Demonstrated by Supernatural

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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WE'RE ON THIS ROAD TOGETHER: THE CHANGING FAN/PRODUCER
RELATIONSHIP IN TELEVISION AS DEMONSTRATED BY *SUPERNATURAL*
Monograph

by

Lisa Macklem

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis explores the changing relationship between fans and producers of television. The traditional hegemonic relationship between these two groups has changed in the digital age giving fans more access to the production process than ever before. Television is under some duress to remonetise itself in the changing landscape. The cultural, media, and communication theories of Bourdieu, Fairclough, D'Acci, and Jenkins, among others, can help to shed light on the dynamics of this relationship and help us to understand how it has changed in recent years. While many studies have examined fan communities and fan cultural production, this thesis will focus on how fan interaction has influenced the production of *Supernatural* through a close reading of the text of the show. As the television industry increasingly seeks to engage and retain audience members, an understanding of how this new relationship influences the very fabric of television becomes a timely one.

Keywords

Fan studies, Bourdieu, Fairclough, D'Acci, Hall, *Supernatural*, television production, genre, cultural discourse analysis, women in media, textual analysis.

Epigraph

“Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole.”

Dean Winchester, “Pilot” (1.01)

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the two boys who watched the episodes with me: Dominick Grace and Othello.

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1 Introduction

Like any dialog, we're in that conversation. It gives us an indication of what viewer expectation is and that helps us play tension against viewer expectation. We want to scare people and surprise them and make them worried, so it tells us where the zeitgeist is moving so we can do a counter-move or move along with it.¹ Ben Edlund, Writer, Executive Producer, seasons 2-8 – *Supernatural*

We're so far down the line by the time something airs, we couldn't possibly shift courses based on the fact that unexpectedly, they don't like a certain twist or a certain character.... And, by the way, at this point in the life of the series, there's always going to be a divided opinion. That's part of the fun.² Sera Gamble, Writer, EP, Showrunner seasons 6 and 7 – *Supernatural*

First of all, I love our fans. I love them to death. I love how passionate they are. But they tend to worry unnecessarily. They tend to get stressed before they have a chance to judge the finished product. We are so conscious and aware of our fans. We're making the show for the fans; we're not making the show for the network. We would never do anything to betray them. I'm not saying we're perfect. I'm not saying we don't make mistakes. But we're very conscious and aware. And when we do make mistakes, we course-correct. So if I can get any message to them, it's, 'Don't worry. We're making choices based on what's best creatively for the show.'³ Eric Kripke, Creator, Writer, EP, Executive Consultant, Showrunner seasons 1-5 - *Supernatural*

According to Cornel Sandvoss, “[t]he study of fans and fandom has formed one of the most proliferating areas of media and cultural studies in recent decades” (“One Dimensional” 832). How fans interact with their favorite television shows has also long been a focus of much attention. Studies have given weight to fannish practices and artifacts, such as pilgrimages, fan fiction, vidding⁴, and cosplay. Communication theory

¹ In conversation with Carina Adly MacKenzie at San Diego Comic Con 2011. Carina Adly MacKenzie. “‘*Supernatural*’: Does fan reaction impact the writing? Sera Gamble and Ben Edlund weigh in.” *Zap2It*. July 25, 2011. Accessed August 5, 2013. <http://blog.zap2it.com/frominsidethebox/2011/07/supernatural-does-fan-reaction-impact-the-writing-sera-gamble-and-ben-edlund-weigh-in.html>

² *Ibid.*

³ Eric Kripke in conversation with Michael Ausiello. Michael Ausiello. “*Supernatural* Exec: ‘We Won’t be *One Tree Hill* with Monsters!’” *TV Guide*. July 21, 2007. Accessed August 5, 2013. <http://www.tvguide.com/news/Supernatural-Exec-We-8522.aspx>

⁴ Jeremy Butler defines “fan vidders, fan vids TV fans who edit together shots from their favorite programs and lay popular music over the images” (453).

and economic theory have also been applied in attempts to understand both how and why fans interact with the object of their attention. In today's digital environment, it is easier than ever for fans to interact with each other and both produce and disseminate their own artifacts as response and alternative to the televisual artifact. Media studies has also long focused on the production of television, considering economic factors from both within the industry and from without. This thesis explores the evolving dynamic that has sprung up between fans and producers of television, which is facilitated by the Internet.

Supernatural, a television series on the CW network, created by Eric Kripke, provides a unique case study of the effects of this new relationship, making this thesis a timely one. *Supernatural* began in 2005, really at the beginning of this new era of television in the digital world, and is still on the air today as television moves ever more firmly into the digital environment. As producers increasingly recognize the importance of fans in a progressively more global and splintered marketplace, understanding this relationship grows in importance. The extent to which fans have an influence on the original artifact can be understood by a close reading of the text of *Supernatural* itself.

In order to understand how the new relationship between consumers/viewers/fans and producers/writers has evolved and to speculate on where it might be going, it is necessary to first understand the history of that relationship and to place *Supernatural* in that context. The Internet has facilitated a closer relationship between audiences and producers than was perhaps ever anticipated. This influence is seen in numerous aspects of *Supernatural*. The producers are able to defy genre labels and play with expectations to a large extent because the audience is knowledgeable about the show and its producers and their intentions. Technological changes have affected how consumers view and interact with television programming, and these changes have also affected how producers of television content monetize their product. *Supernatural* provides an excellent case study of how these technological changes have fundamentally changed the consumer/viewer-producer/writer relationship. In order to simplify the discussion somewhat, I refer to the two major groups as fans and producers throughout the thesis. This is, however, somewhat of an over simplification. "Fans" encompass the most active members of the audience, and a distinction should be made between "active" and "passive" viewers, between casual viewers who watch the show when it is convenient

and passionate viewers who watch and actively seek out a connection with those who are making the show.⁵ More is said about this continuum of response and viewership. On the other side of the relationship, producers is used, but in a non-traditional, non-industry sense. The television industry recognizes producers as those responsible for physically coordinating the making of a show (Orlebar 303). In this thesis, the term is used to refer to all of those people responsible for producing *Supernatural* but primarily to the writers and showrunners. When appropriate, specific people and their positions are referenced. This thesis examines what is new about the relationship between fans and producers and how that relationship has changed the very show itself as illustrated by a close reading of *Supernatural*.

As the three quotations above illustrate, how producers, writers and showrunners interpret their relationship with their fans and how this impacts their writing and the show itself varies widely among individuals even on the same show. Currently, reaching out to fans actively through mediums such as Twitter and Facebook is optional, but the entertainment industry is increasingly making such contact a mandate for all of its employees. As of the fall of 2013, Nielsen is now tracking Twitter activity, as announced on Nielsen's site on October 10, 2013:

Today Nielsen, a global information and measurement company, announced the commercial launch of Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings, the first-ever measure of the total activity and reach of TV-related conversation on Twitter.... Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings enable TV networks to measure the full Twitter engagement surrounding their programs, to measure the effectiveness of Twitter TV-related audience engagement strategies, and to better understand the relationship between Twitter and tune-in. Additionally, Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings assist agencies and advertisers in making data-driven media planning and buying decisions that incorporate the full impact of Twitter TV. ("Press Room")

The digital environment is making immediate, two-way dialogues easier than ever before, and the television industry is committed to incorporating as many simultaneous and intertwined platforms and points of contact as possible to increase viewer engagement and ultimately retention. How this increased contact affects the end product is still a largely unknown factor. In Nielsen's press release, Graeme Hutton comments that

⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of the demographics of viewers refer to Chapter 5, 73.

“Social TV is transforming TV from something we watch to something we do,” underscoring the more active role fans are assuming. Social TV refers to the combination of television with any and all social media. On October 6, 2013, Superwiki posted a guide on how to maximize Twitter ratings for the show (Superwiki, “Tweets”). How producers can effectively incorporate these new communication challenges while still retaining control over their writing is also a timely subject.

Television as it has been traditionally thought of is also changing radically as the entertainment industry grapples with how best to monetize their investment in digital environments. Fans are generally recognized as being more than passive consumers, but it is important to understand just how much real power they may be exerting over the finished product when it finally appears on the small screen. Changes in how producers interact with fans will inevitably also change how television is now monetized.

Supernatural first aired in 2005 and entered its ninth season in September of 2013. This thesis will confine itself to a close examination of the first eight seasons and a total of 172 episodes which will constitute the “text” of the series. References to the series will be by title as well as by season and episode number (e.g. “Pilot” 1.01). When referencing only a season, the short form “S” will be used (e.g. S1 for season one). I also use the term “text” in the sense that Fairclough (“Critical Discourse Analysis” 5) uses it: that texts exist in a layered and nuanced inter-relationship with other resources or “texts.” According to Fairclough, “text” refers to a number of related elements: “That is to say, they are different elements, but not discrete, fully separate, elements” (“Critical Discourse Analysis” 3). Fairclough uses the term text in a broad way and recognizes that different elements come together through different ways of making meaning to result in a text (*Analysing Discourse* 3, 102). In the context of the fan/producer relationship fan forums, interactions on Twitter, and genre expectations are all examples of these different elements. A closer examination of the text of *Supernatural* itself will yield an indication of what effect communication between fans and producers is having on the final product and how the interaction may benefit the production process or stifle the creativity of the writers. As it enters its ninth season, *Supernatural* can provide guidance to other series on how to foster a lucrative, nuanced, and long-lasting relationship with fans, especially, for example, other genre shows like *Beauty and the Beast*, which is currently struggling in

the ratings. Perhaps more significantly, *Supernatural*'s experience can be extrapolated to any genre to improve ratings by more fully engaging and rewarding fans.

1.1 Literature Review⁶

While the roots of fan culture studies can be found in the Birmingham school of cultural studies in the works of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart⁷, this thesis will focus on the digital era and on those audience⁸ members with specific fan focuses rather than media audiences in general. Much has been written on the nature of fans and the construction of fan cultures and communities. Some attention will be given to the development of specific important fandoms such as *Star Trek*, *Buffy*, *The Vampire Slayer*, and *Dr Who*, but the primary focus will be on what these fandoms can say about *Supernatural* fans and the nature of that community and its influence. Fan studies has produced a preponderance of material about fan reception and fan cultural production, but this thesis seeks to take the circuit one step further and focus on how fans have influenced the mainstream cultural artifact itself. Digital cultures have allowed fans to acquire more visibility and power, and Henry Jenkins' work on convergence culture will form a significant influence on this thesis. Foundational works that help to define fandom include Hills (*Fan*), Jenkins (*Convergence; Fans, Bloggers*), and Sandvoss (*Fans*). These studies focus on fan engagement as well as the complex reasons behind fan community formation. This thesis looks briefly at these issues to better understand the dynamic that has formed between fan communities and the entertainment industry.

Methodological texts from two primary areas are drawn on: fan studies and television studies. At its heart, this project is not about fan studies in the traditional sense. It will not focus on the production of fan fiction, vidding, or cosplay for example. It also

⁶ Documentation style is MLA. Where authors have been referenced in more than one work, the work itself will be referenced in parentheses within the text. The reader may consult the Works Cited and Consulted section for full publication information.

⁷ See the collection of essays in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Eds. Lynn Spiegel and Jan Olsson.

⁸ I make use of the general term "audience" here to distinguish between fans and casual viewers. Audience studies have tended to be divided into general audience studies which make little distinction about the level of participation and fan studies which focus on that specific faction of the audience.

will not focus on how the production of fan fiction may have an influence on the production of scripts for a series, for instance. However, fan studies can help to explain media and cultural theory, as Hills (*How to*) does. Instead, the focus will be on how fans through interaction with production may be influencing scripts. Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (*Fandom*) provide an excellent overview to the field. Lewis' 1992 anthology provides a good starting point and touches on a number of important industry considerations, such as the economization of fandom, and while somewhat dated, still has a significant contribution to make to the literature. Fan studies grew largely out of audience research, reception studies, and subculture theory, and several texts provide useful background for understanding those dynamics. Both M. E. Brown and McRobbie provide insight into women's experience in particular, while Fiske puts a North American spin on the Birmingham school.

Of the many studies and books on fandom and fan culture, overall the emphasis is on fan practices and fan productions (e.g. Hellekson and Busse). The studies move inevitably from the artifact (television series, book, film, band, etc) to the fan. Fan practice may include lobbying for shows to stay on the air, but little or nothing has been written about how the fans have changed the shape of the artifact itself and what effect that may have on the process of television production in the future. Tulloch and Jenkins (*Science Fiction*) specifically see fans as powerless to shape the actual production. Recent changes in the dynamics between production and fans have seen a shift in the hegemonic relationship, however, and this thesis focuses on this new relationship and its possible implications. Busse and Gray provide a more recent assessment of the state of fan studies in the age of new media.

Studies on different fandoms help to provide context for similarities and differences with *Supernatural's* fandom (Tulloch and Jenkins, *Science Fiction*; Knaggs; Ford, De Kosnik, and Harrington; Thompson; Pustz; and Pearson). While many of these studies focus, again, on fan productions, they also look at fan interaction with production and fan interpretations, which provide an important component in understanding the communication circuit and the development of the hegemonic relationship between fans and producers. Thompson, for instance, looks at strategies employed by producers to engage fans but focuses on fan fiction. Gray's ("Antifandom", *Television Entertainment*)

work on the anti-fan provides valuable insight into a different kind of fan engagement that can still be utilized by producers and has ramifications for the writing process as well. Johnson also looks at a more antagonistic relationship between fans and producers. Leonard and Lessig both provide insight into how fan productions while technically breaking Intellectual Property laws are still a boon to the overall economic health of a property.⁹ The changing attitude to fan productions also provides more evidence for the changing relationship between fans and producers. Martens examines how fans, particularly teens, are encouraged to participate in the creation of commodities, such as books, that target them as consumers.

Gray and Mittel, Jenkins (*Convergence; Fans, Bloggers*), and Mittel (“Sites”) consider spoilers as paratexts. These studies consider spoilers primarily as they figure in fan community structure and interaction, but increasingly the control over spoilers and how production responds to fan reaction has become an important component in the fan and production relationship. Spoilers can be an important way to draw fans in and maintain interest during hiatus. The interest in this thesis lies primarily in how production reacts to fan reaction and little has been done in this regard.

Several factors have contributed to the increase in fan influence over production. Genre or cult fandoms tend to produce more active and passionate fans and the digitization of media and social media has increased fans’ ability to interact with each other and production almost instantaneously. Several important studies have focused on these developments including Abbot; Baym (*Tune In*); Manovich; Jancovich; Deery; Costello and Moore; Spigel and Olsson; Fiske; Booth (*Digital*); Carpentier; Jancovich and Lyons; and Jenkins, Ford, and Green. Baym (*Tune In, Online Fandom*) provides an early, in-depth look at female fan communities. Abbott, Jancovich, and Jancovich and Lyons all examine the phenomenon of cult TV which helps to create a welcoming space for fan/producer interaction. Manovich, Booth (*Digital*), Carpentier, and Deery look at the role of digital media in enhancing fan/producer communication. Ross looks at the ways in which production engages fans to deepen their commitment to the program

⁹ Anrejevic also provides insight to the added value of online fan discussions for production.

through strategies like voting for *American Idol*. Gillan explores media companies' strategies of both tracking and interacting with fans as part of a larger strategy to combine television and digital media. Murray examines how producers are using fans to do promotions for them. Engagement between showrunners, specifically, and fans is covered by Shefrin, Phalen and Osellame, Wild, and Brett Martin. While these sources illustrate the increasingly close relationship between fans and producers and indicate a power shift, these sources do not closely examine the effect on the artifact itself that results from such interactions.

A number of sources provide a good background on the nature of television production including Jancovich and Lyons, Harrington and Bielby, Holt and Perren, Orlebar, Brett Martin, and Jeremy Butler. Gillan, Murray, and Shefrin provide insight into how producers are seeking to benefit from fan engagement. Butler, Orlebar, Brett Martin, Harrington and Bielby, and Holt and Perren provide often overlooked explanations of the day-to-day concerns of producing a television series. These texts provide insight into influences other than fans that may play a significant role in the shaping of the text of a show. Several sources provide background to audience studies, such as Hagen and Wasko, Tulloch and Jenkins (*Science Fiction*), Tulloch, Abercrombie and Longhurst, and Nightingale. A broader look at audience behavior as contrasted to fan behavior is necessary to determine if the differences are significant. Examining fans from other fandoms, such as *Lost*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Star Trek*, provides a baseline from which to assess the *Supernatural* fans. Differences between audiences and fandoms are, in fact, negligible in the context of examining the current fan/producer relationship and how that is manifested within *Supernatural*. In addition, several sources look at the *Supernatural* relationship between fans and production specifically, and these include Knight, Zubernis and Larsen (*Fandom*), Larsen and Zubernis (*Fangasm*), and various interviews with writers and showrunners from the show itself. All of these elements form points on the communication circuit. This thesis synthesizes these various elements and examines what influence they ultimately have on the series itself.

Finally, a source that is drawn upon frequently is *Superwiki*, the *Supernatural* Wiki that is run and edited by *Supernatural* fans. It is the most comprehensive repository of *Supernatural* information and history, including links to original sources. The

information is provided, checked, and edited by the ultimate authorities on the show itself: the fans. Producers have stated that they also reference the site when they need to verify plot points for instance.¹⁰ It is referenced frequently here to support basic factual information about the show and documentation of fan/producer interactions.

The works cited above have all contributed to the conclusions which follow. An understanding of the literature informs the closer analysis of the text of *Supernatural* itself. This textual analysis helps to understand how the relationship between fan and producer is changing in the changing context of media production. In order to more fully understand the development of the argument, an outline of the structure of the thesis follows.

1.2 Framework

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters. After this first chapter provides a general overview and background to the topic, chapter two focuses on the methodology underlying the thesis. The primary methodologies relied upon are those of Hall, D'Acci, Bourdieu, and Fairclough. Hall and D'Acci speak to the communication model that best reflects the interaction between fans and producers. Bourdieu and Fairclough are utilized in relation to discourse specific to hegemonic relations in the digital media space. This chapter introduces the social organization of the television industry and *Supernatural* itself. Chapter 3 examines the role of the showrunner in particular. An explanation of what a showrunner is assists in clarifying the relationship between producers and fans, looking specifically at that relationship between the showrunners of *Supernatural* and its fans. The showrunner is responsible for the big picture of a series, so the chapter focuses on how the many demands on his or her attention impact the showrunner's decisions. This chapter begins to look to the text of *Supernatural* itself for indications of how these interactions may contribute to the story itself with, of course, a particular interest in how fans impact both the longer story arcs and specific episodes.

¹⁰ Jules Wilkinson is the moderator of the site. See her YouTube video from Creation's Salute to Supernatural Convention in Vancouver in August 2013 for Jared Padalecki acknowledging the site. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MWahi5axq0>

Chapter 4 examines the use of humour in the show. Because *Supernatural* is a horror show, its use of humour may seem out of place at first consideration. However, humour is often utilized in horror, and it is not unusual to see moments of humour within a horror text or even to see the two genres combined. It is unusual to see a drama able to maintain its credibility by shifting entirely to comedy for almost entire episodes. In considering international distribution, comedy is one genre that does not translate well. Part of the failure of comedy to cross cultural borders is the reliance on wordplay and social mores. Different cultures may not share the same cultural touchstones, particularly when those touchstones rely heavily on popular culture that may not be globally accessible. In addition, wordplay often involves puns and colloquialisms which may not translate literally or figuratively into another language. The producers of *Supernatural* are able to make full creative use of comedy within the horror genre largely because of the nature of their relationship with the fans. Some of the latitude afforded to the producers is due to this close relationship. Humour itself is often built from a shared well of experience, a knowledge that the audience will understand the in-joke or veiled reference. The use of humour to the extent that it is used in *Supernatural* is but one example of how this close relationship with fans influences the actual text of the show in ways that expand the creative universe of the producers.

Chapter 5 looks closely at the development of women characters on *Supernatural*. A number of factors contribute to how women are portrayed on the show. Some of the characteristics must be attributed to the horror genre itself. The producers of the show are cognizant that they are writing a horror show, and they are mindful of the tropes of that genre: women as victims being one that looms large. However, the majority of *Supernatural* fans, at least those who are in active dialogue with producers, are women. This chapter examines how this relationship has contributed to shaping the women on the show. In this instance, fan response has often had a chilling effect on the creativity of the producers and their female constructs.

Chapter 6 expands on the relationship developed between fan and producer to look more specifically at the text of *Supernatural* with regard to how the dialogue developed around the show extends within the show itself as the show breaks the fourth wall. Producers are able to include direct dialogue with fans because of the nature of the

relationship developed outside of the show itself. The technique itself is not unique to *Supernatural*, genre shows, or even television, but the relationship between fans and producers in relation to *Supernatural* allows producers to use the technique to an unprecedented degree.

The conclusion explores how the unique convergence of fans with production has allowed *Supernatural*, a seemingly low rated cult phenomenon, to push the boundaries of fan interaction and the communication model as currently understood. This chapter sums up the evidence presented in the previous chapters, providing a final contextualization within the methodological framework, and will discuss the significance of the findings. Some thoughts on how this relationship may impact on production in the larger context of television in general and the writing process itself concludes the thesis. In order to facilitate an understanding of the textual evidence a synopsis of the main story points follows.

1.3 Synopsis of *Supernatural*

Supernatural is the story of Dean and Sam Winchester. The “Pilot” begins 22 years ago in a flashback. John and Mary Winchester are putting their two children to bed, Sam aged 6 months and Dean, four years old. Mary is awakened by a noise from the baby’s room and goes to check on him. She thinks John is already looking in on him, but when she realizes it is not her husband, she rushes back in. Hearing his wife’s screams, John rushes to the nursery to find his wife eviscerated and pinned to the ceiling of the nursery before she bursts into flames. Grabbing the baby, John puts Sam in Dean’s arms, charging the four year old with getting the younger son to safety. Flash forward to the present and Dean arrives at Stanford University to get Sam to come help him find their father who has gone missing. After Mary’s mysterious death, John discovered that supernatural beings existed and he dedicated himself to tracking down and killing whatever killed his wife. He trained his sons to be hunters, but Sam rebelled, wanting a normal life, and he left the family to pursue a career in law. When Dean comes to his brother, they have not even spoken for several years. Sam is successful at school and is in a happy relationship with Jessica. Dean convinces Sam to come with him to look for John

for the weekend. They do not find their father but they do find and kill a ghost that has been killing “civilians.” Dean wants Sam to keep looking for their father with him, but Sam insists that he return to his life and his girlfriend. After dropping his brother off, Dean gets a bad feeling and returns to his brother’s apartment to find it engulfed in flames with Jessica pinned to the ceiling and eviscerated just as their mother had been. Once again, Dean rescues his brother. The episode ends with Sam vowing to find both their father and Jessica’s killer.

The first season follows the brothers as they criss-cross America in their ’67 Chevy Impala looking for their father and hunting supernatural beings and urban legends. The family business is saving people, hunting things. During the season, Sam starts having visions that are premonitions of people dying. They learn that it was a yellow-eyed demon (YED) that killed their mother. The demon’s “daughter,” Meg, tries to get close to Sam and eventually captures their father with whom they are briefly reunited. The brothers turn to Bobby Singer, an old family friend and hunter, for help. Bobby will become a surrogate father-figure to the boys in later seasons. The season ends as John is possessed by the YED and critically wounds Dean. The brothers had recently discovered a special gun, the colt, made by Samuel Colt that is the one thing that can kill anything, including this demon. Sam manages to free himself from the demon’s control long enough to shoot his father but is not able to take the killing shot which would also kill his father. The season ends with the Impala being struck by a semi-truck driven by a demon, leaving the fate of all three Winchesters in doubt.

Season two begins with Dean in a coma in the hospital and Sam and John with minor injuries. In order to save Dean, John sells his soul to the YED. Before he dies, however, he tells Dean, once again, to look out for his brother, but this time he tells him if he cannot save Sam, he will have to kill him. Dean is consumed with guilt over John’s death as he deduces he went to Hell to save him, and he is burdened by keeping the secret of John’s last words from his brother. Sam is re-committed to following in their father’s footsteps and killing the YED. By mid-season, Dean reveals John’s last words to Sam and Sam becomes concerned that he has a dark side and he will turn evil at some point. This season introduces a larger hunting community. The brothers meet Ellen Harvelle and her daughter Jo, who knew their father. It becomes clear that John kept secrets from

his sons. While Jo seems to be a potential love interest for Dean, it does not really develop. In the course of their search, the brothers cross paths with a Trickster, a Loki figure, who amuses himself by teaching people lessons based on their own foibles. The brothers also learn that there are other “special” children like Sam whom the YED is interested in. At the end of the season, Sam is kidnapped and forced to fight to the death with other “special” children. The YED also takes Sam back to his nursery and shows Sam that the YED bled into Sam’s mouth as a baby, apparently tainting Sam’s own blood in some way. The winner of the fight to the death will lead the YED’s army out of Hell. Dean and Bobby race to find Sam, arriving just as he wins a fight with the one other “special” child left, Jake. Dean distracts Sam and Jake is able to kill Sam by stabbing him in the back. To save his brother, Dean sells his soul to a crossroads demon and is given one year to live. They learn the YED’s endgame is to open the Gate to Hell with the help of Jake and the colt which the YED has also received as payment for Dean’s life. Bobby, Ellen, Sam, and Dean rush to Stull cemetery to stop Jake from opening the gate. They do not stop the gate from being opened, but with the help of John, who also escapes from Hell when the gate opens, Dean shoots and kills the YED.

Season three was a short season because of the writers’ strike. The main arc of the season is Sam and Dean trying to break Dean’s deal so that he does not go to Hell at the end of the season. The season introduced two new regulars. Bela is trader in supernatural artifacts and becomes an antagonist. Ruby is a demon who tells Sam that she wants to help him save his brother. Lilith is a demon even more powerful than the YED who they learn holds Dean’s contract. In the end, they are not able to break Dean’s contract and he goes to Hell.

Season four opens with Dean crawling out of his own grave. Dean has no idea how he came back, and Bobby takes them to his friend Pamela Barnes, a seer, for help. She is blinded when she sees who rescued Dean. They learn that the angel Castiel was the one to raise Dean from Hell under God’s orders. While Dean was in Hell for four months which was actually 40 years in Hell-time, Sam was spiralling out of control. He has been working with Ruby to hone his supernatural powers, and by drinking demon blood, he can now exorcise demons with just his mind. Sam was determined to kill Lilith to get revenge for Dean’s death and felt guilty over not being able to save his brother himself.

The angels have come to earth to prevent Lilith from breaking the 66 seals which will free Lucifer. The season centres on preventing that. The angels, other than Castiel, appear to have an ambiguous role as they will do anything to prevent the seals from being broken. The demons, including Alastair who tortured Dean in Hell, are working with Lilith to free Lucifer. While in Hell, Dean is ashamed to have to admit to his brother that he became the torturer after enduring 30 years on the rack in order to make the pain stop. Castiel sends Dean back in time where he sees that his mother and her family had been hunters. The YED kills John in the past and brings him back to life when Mary agrees to grant him a favor in ten years time – the time the YED appears in Sam's nursery. The brothers discover a series of books written by Carver Edlund (Chuck Shurley) that chronicle their lives. They learn that Chuck is actually a prophet of the lord. The brothers also learn that they have a half brother Adam but they are too late to save him from being killed by ghouls. Meanwhile, Ruby is seeking to control Sam by keeping him addicted to demon blood. Dean, Bobby, and Castiel try to get Sam to stop but he is convinced this is the only way to stop Lilith. Zachariah, Castiel's superior, tells Dean that he will be the one to stop Lilith, but Dean learns that the angels do not want to stop the apocalypse from happening – they actually want it to happen to bring paradise to earth, regardless of the millions who will die. The angels are allowed to interfere in this way because God has gone missing. Castiel helps Dean escape from Zachariah, but Dean arrives too late to prevent Sam from killing Lilith which is actually the last seal to free Lucifer. This was Ruby's plan all along and Dean and Sam kill her together as the season ends and Lucifer is released.

Season five centers on putting Lucifer back in his cage in Hell. The brothers learn that they are actually heavenly vessels. Dean is meant for Michael, and Sam is meant for Lucifer. The brothers have to agree to be vessels, and they both vow that they will not. Bobby ends up in a wheelchair when Meg shows up to try to kill Dean. Heaven is still in chaos, but Zachariah is in charge of getting Dean to say yes. His superiors are Michael and Raphael. Later in the season it is revealed that the Trickster is actually the final archangel Gabriel. Castiel vows to find the absent God to put Lucifer back in the pit and bring the angels back under control. Castiel is joined by his fellow angel Balthazar in trying to help the brothers kill Lucifer. Crowley, the king of the crossroads demons, also

comes to their aid by returning the colt to them. He wants Lucifer out of the way so that he can take over as king of Hell. Ellen and Jo are both killed in the fight against Lucifer. When Lucifer was let out of the pit, the four horsemen of the apocalypse were also released. The rings worn by the four form a key to Lucifer's prison. The brothers are able to kill War, Famine, and Pestilence and make a deal with Death. Dean almost says yes to Michael, but in the end, honors his promise to his brother. Zachariah is killed. The angels resurrect Adam and use him as a vessel for Michael because he too is descendant of the Winchester bloodline. Gabriel agrees to help the Winchesters and is killed by his brother, Lucifer. In a plot to capture Lucifer, Sam agrees to be his vessel. There is a final showdown in Stull cemetery. Sam has not been able to take control of Lucifer, and Lucifer is facing Michael who has possessed Adam. Dean shows up to stop it and Castiel and Bobby, whose legs Crowley has restored, show up to help. Lucifer explodes Castiel and snaps Bobby's neck. He is in the process of beating Dean to death when Sam takes control and flings himself into the pit, taking Michael – and Adam – with him. Chuck turns out to be God but disappears once the apocalypse is averted. Dean is healed and Bobby and Castiel are brought back to life.

A year passes before the start of season six. Dean has honored Sam's last wishes to get out of hunting and go live with his former girlfriend Lisa. Sam suddenly reappears and tells Dean that he has been out of Hell for most of the year and has been hunting with their grandfather Samuel Campbell who is also mysteriously back from the dead. Only Sam's body returned from Hell, however, and he has been walking around soulless. Dean employs Death's help in restoring Sam's soul, but Death warns that there is a wall around Sam's memories from Hell which would likely tip him into madness should the wall crumble. The brothers race to stop a plot to raise Eve, the mother of all monsters. They do not stop her being raised but they do manage to kill her. The brothers learn eventually that Castiel has been working with Crowley behind their backs in order to gather enough souls to become strong enough to take control of Heaven and restore order there. In order to gather the souls, Crowley and Castiel have plotted to open Purgatory and take the souls from there. In order to distract the brothers, Castiel breaks the wall in Sam's head, releasing the memories of Hell. Dean and Bobby race to prevent Castiel from opening the door to Purgatory. They are too late, and Castiel has completed the spell as well as double

crossing Crowley and killing Raphael. Sam manages to reintegrate the fragments of his psyche to join Dean and Bobby, but even stabbing Castiel with an angel blade will not kill him. He tells them it is because he is no longer an angel; he is their new god because of the power he now wields as a result of having absorbed all the souls from Purgatory, including the Leviathans.

Season seven picks up right where the last ended. Castiel soon realizes that he cannot control or contain the souls within him and tries to return them to Purgatory with the brothers and Bobby's help. The Leviathans, however, do not leave his body, and Castiel is killed, and the Leviathans are loosed into the world. Their leader takes the form of Dick Roman, the head of a huge corporation. The Leviathans are essentially a black goo but can shapeshift into any form. As the brothers fight to stop the Leviathans, Bobby is killed. Roman rebuffs Crowley's advances so Crowley is once again working with the brothers. Roman uncovers an ancient tablet that contains information on how to kill the Leviathans. The discovery of the tablet triggers the activation of Kevin Tran as the prophet who is the only one who can read it. They are also helped in their fight against Roman by Charley Bradbury. Bobby returns as a vengeful spirit whom they must kill. Castiel has also been restored to his body, but he is borderline insane and consumed with guilt over what he has done. Kevin deciphers a spell that will kill the head of the Leviathans and thereby stop them. In the climax to the season, Castiel and Dean confront Roman while Sam rescues Kevin Tran who is being held by Roman. Castiel and Dean are successful in sending Roman back to Purgatory, but they get blasted there themselves in the process. Crowley takes Kevin prisoner.

Season eight begins one year after the end of the previous season. The season begins with Dean's return from Purgatory. Castiel is not with him, but he brings back the vampire Benny who helped him survive in Purgatory. Sam has stopped hunting and is living with Amelia and a dog, Riot. Dean pulls him back into hunting to find Kevin Tran and the demon tablet which Kevin has discovered can shut the gates of Hell forever. They discover there is an angel tablet that will also shut the gates of Heaven forever. Sam is appalled that Dean has befriended a vampire, and Dean eventually cuts ties with Benny. Castiel mysteriously reappears with no knowledge of how he was released from Purgatory. Castiel is being controlled and tortured by the angel Naomi who is in charge in

Heaven and who wants the angel tablet. The brothers' paternal grandfather appears to them out of the past pursued by Abaddon a knight of Hell. He tells the brothers they are legacies and belong to a secret society called the Men of Letters which is now defunct. The brothers acquire the keys to the secret Men of Letters bunker and use it as a home base. Kevin deciphers three trials that must be completed to close the gates of Hell. Dean wants to do them, but Sam ends up doing them, and they slowly begin to kill him. One of the trials involves going to Hell where Sam releases Bobby, but they both end up stuck in Purgatory. Dean, with Benny's consent, kills the vampire, sending him to Purgatory to save Sam and release Bobby's soul to heaven. The brothers find Metatron, the angel who transcribed the tablets from the word of God and Castiel begins working with him to close the gates of Heaven. Metatron has his own agenda and casts all the angels out of Heaven for disobeying God, using Castiel's grace as one of the spell ingredients, making Castiel human. The last trial involves turning Crowley back into a human but will kill Sam in the process. Dean stops Sam from completing the final trial in order to save Sam's life, but Sam is dying as the angels are falling from Heaven as the season ends.

Clearly, the text of *Supernatural* is rich in mythic overtones and well realized characters. Fans have been drawn to it because of these elements, and these elements have inspired a greater interest and commitment on the part of fans, leading to the initiation of a dialogue with producers. This relationship has been facilitated by the advent of the digital environment and production practices have also encouraged a deepening of the relationship. Before looking more closely at *Supernatural*, the next chapter examines the methodology and theoretical underpinnings that help to understand this changing relationship.

2 Theoretical Framework, Methodology and the Television Landscape

Before examining the specific evidence of a changing landscape in *Supernatural*, it is necessary to outline the television landscape in general terms. The emerging importance of cult television as a counterpoint to traditional, mainstream television is traced. This landscape is compared to the specific production elements of *Supernatural* and the demographics of its fandom. In addition, this chapter outlines the specific theoretical framework and methodology utilized throughout the thesis.

2.1 The Hegemonic Hierarchy of Television Production

In order to understand the communication dynamics between fans and producers, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of television production itself and how that dynamic has changed and is changing the way that producers and fans interact. It may seem obvious to state that in order for a television series to stay on the air, it must return a profit (Gray, *Television Entertainment* 25; Orlebar; Jeremy Butler). However, how it does that is the result of many factors. Traditionally, television shows have relied on advertising revenue. This advertising revenue is greatest in the first airing of a television program. Revenue from repeats returns fewer profits as fewer viewers tune in. However, more money can be made through syndication and international distribution channels, as well as through the sales of DVDs/blu-rays and other merchandise (Gillan 97; Gray, *Television Entertainment*; Jeremy Butler).

International distribution represents several challenges. Shows need to be translated into other languages either through dubbing or subtitles and adding these elements takes time. Distribution deals also include release windows, and international releases have traditionally followed domestic releases. Not all genres travel well to other cultures. Comedy, in particular, is very culturally specific. This makes the success of *Supernatural* in using comedy particularly interesting given its international fanbase. Science fiction and horror do travel well. Indeed, the success of Asian horror in the North American market proves that the horror genre, at least, travels particularly well. Another challenge that is facilitated by the advent of the Internet, however, is piracy. Harrington and Bielby point out that “fans can and do create online homages to programs that have

never aired on their local TV stations,... [and] [s]imilarly, the thriving bootleg market for pirated entertainment media (which exists both online and offline) enables TV consumption irrespective of the formal distribution process” (911). If a television show is a success in an international market, fans are often not willing to wait for the show to appear on their television because international distribution windows are always staggered after the United States run of the show – often the complete run of the show. Henry Jenkins points out that

Unauthorized circulation of content often emerges from the frustrations which audiences have as they deal with the transitional state of alternative delivery channels, with the frustrations of trying to navigate through a system that seems to promise them the media they want when they want it but frequently disappoints. This situation is what we mean to describe when we suggest that “piracy” is more often a product of market failures on the part of media industry than of moral failures on the part of media audiences. (*Spreadable* 117)

The industry is changing its views about the Internet even as it struggles with exactly how it needs to change to take advantage of new paradigms.

The Internet facilitated fans’ access to television series. It also encouraged this because forums and blogs post within moments of an episode first airing in the United States’ eastern time zone. In order to be able to participate meaningfully in the conversation online, fans need to have watched the show. In addition, most of these discussions, at least initially in the run of a series, take place in English. Many international *Supernatural* fans credit their English skills to watching the show. The same can be said for fans of the Harry Potter novels.¹¹ As a fandom grows, the artifact is translated and forums, blogs, fan artifacts, appear in numerous other languages as well. However, if the original material is in English, if a fan wants to interact directly with the producers, that interaction will most likely be in English, certainly for the numerous shows, like *Supernatural*, which are produced in Hollywood for an English market. Producers and networks were initially resistant to fan engagement on the Internet, viewing it as appropriation of their property. A good example of this is Fox’s legal action against a fan site dedicated to *The X-Files* after initially being very supportive of it. In

¹¹ See Henry Jenkins. “Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the *Harry Potter* Wars.” *Convergence Culture*. 175-216.

fact, campaigns were launched by studios against *The Simpsons*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek* fan sites at about the same time. This prompted fan campaigns to support free speech on the Internet, such as the site *Free Speech is Out There*. At the time, rumours abounded that Chris Carter, creator of *The X-Files*, was behind the attack from Fox. George Lucas has been litigious about the *Star Wars* property on numerous levels, but Matt Groening (*The Simpsons*' creator) was widely touted as supporting fan sites and was even identified as a frequent visitor (Yorio). The dispute between Fox and Gil Trevizo, the creator of a fansite for *Millenium*, the companion show to *The X-Files*, demonstrates how at first, studios and networks just did not understand the power of the Internet and did not pursue what would become a very fruitful and powerful communication conduit. Trevizo launched his site before Fox launched their own site upon the premiere of *Millenium*. Fox demanded Trevizo remove all copyrighted images from his site and then had his Internet provider turn off his site. Trevizo responded "that [he] created this Website to help build an Internet community for the series....[he] did it to help"(Errico). Fox's concern at the time was that the fan sites were undercutting the official sites and fans were "doing things that are against the wishes of the creators of the show" (David Oakes, Fox attorney, qtd in Errico). Clearly, the concern was economic.

Traditionally, producers had very little contact with fans, with the exception of contact such as fan mail or through network or studio lawyers. Lance Evans of CBS in an interview with Robert Sabal stated, "Because of the very fact that they [letter writing campaigns] generate publicity about a show, they're good for the show" (187). Perry Simon of NBC was a bit more critical of fan campaigns:

organized campaigns also have drawbacks because quite often people will get a newsletter saying, 'Please drop a letter today to so and so,' and you get these form letters coming. I think the network now realizes it. The letters are basically being generated on copying machines and they're not worth much. But one well-placed, well-written, letter to the correct person in New York stating a point and why you had a problem with one of our shows will work its way down the chain of command and have unbelievable power. (Sabal 188)

The Internet has made direct contact much easier, especially when producers are on social media such as Twitter and are active users. Perhaps most importantly, that communication can now be clearly two way. Twitter has only been around since 2006, but one initial concern, at least for the writers, was copyright issues around fans tweeting

story ideas. Fans were quick to turn to Twitter to express delight or displeasure with a storyline and to offer advice on possible plot developments. This resulted in writers and showrunners, including Ben Blacker, of *Supernatural*, and Amy Berg, of *Eureka*, warning followers that if they “pitched” ideas they would be blocked from their Twitter feed. An important element in producing either a film or television series is having a clear chain of title so that no one can make future claims on the property (Biederman et al 744-6). In the past, similar concerns had lead writers to remain somewhat sequestered from fans. Indeed, most audiences did not really concern themselves with the writers and producers of shows and most mainstream viewers would be hard pressed to name either the author of their favorite episode of a television show or the showrunner, if they even knew what a showrunner did.

A showrunner is, quite simply, the person running the show. Jeremy Butler defines showrunners as “[p]roducers (often scriptwriters) who are responsible for the ongoing production of a program” (466). Most shows will also list at least one or more executive producers. The showrunner is usually credited as such, but there may be several other executive producers who may help to shoulder some of the production responsibilities. Brett Martin points out that television is a place “in which the demands of art and commerce are in constant, sometimes tense, negotiation” (11). The showrunner is responsible for delivering a cost-effective, creative product. The hierarchy of responsibility is a complex one in the television industry. In the case of *Supernatural*, the immediate superior that the showrunner has reported to since 2006 is the CW network. Dawn Osteroff was president of the network from its formation by merger of the WB and UPN networks in 2006. Mark Pedowitz succeeded Osteroff as president in 2011. *Supernatural* was a WB network show for its first season. The show remains a WB studios production, so the show is written on the WB lot in Burbank, California. The show is actually filmed in Vancouver, British Columbia, to take advantage of filming tax credits which help lower the cost of production. The CW is actually owned by two corporate parent companies with CBS and Time Warner each with a 50 percent ownership (Gray *Television Entertainment* 84).

Often, the showrunner is also the creator of a television series. Some showrunners, such as Gene Rodenberry, Dick Wolf, J.J. Abrams, and Joss Whedon have

become famous because of their inordinate success with multiple projects. Interestingly, all have been successful with genre or cult series. When a showrunner has success with one series, the network or studio will often ask them to leave that series in order to create another successful property. In the case of *Supernatural*, Eric Kripke, the creator and showrunner for five seasons, left to collaborate with J.J. Abrams on *Revolution*. The showrunner is also the one person who deals with every other person involved with producing a television show, and this develops a very unique skill set in communications.

While the showrunner is often the creator, and therefore arguably the visionary of the series, creating the characters and writing is far from his or her only duty. In fact, the showrunner often writes very few of the actual episodes. He or she is also responsible for the day to day production of the series, clearances, liaising with network executives, and managing the writers' room. In writing about David Chase's duties as executive producer on the *Sopranos*, Martin states that "[e]very decision – from story direction to casting to the color of seemingly insignificant characters' shirt – passed through [his] office" (8). While the showrunner is usually credited as an executive producer, that title actually confers a number of different duties. As writers are with a show through several seasons, they will get increased responsibility for performing some of the same duties as the showrunner, under the showrunner's direction. The title is also an employment progression, so a writer will move from just writer to a writer and producer credit and eventually to an executive producer credit in addition to credit as a writer on those episodes he or she writes. A producer/executive producer credit will appear on every episode. The credit of producer often falls on the person, in this case Jim Michaels, who is actually on the site of filming, ensuring that everything is running smoothly. Michaels whose credit is co-executive producer (the titles are generally fairly fluid) describes his job:

I spend the majority of my time prepping the upcoming episode with our directors, while keeping an eye on the shooting crew. My days are very busy scouting locations, casting, budget meetings, departmental meetings, working with our first class publicity department, etc. My typical day starts with the crew call and ends with the wrap. (*Winchester Bros*)¹²

¹² It is important to note that this interview was conducted by a fan run website. This interview and others like it on Superwiki demonstrate the high degree of interest in the production of *Supernatural* by its fans.

The producer on set liaises with the showrunner.

Typically, the showrunner will have an overall vision for the season. In Kripke's case, he had a five year storyarc. Jeremy Carver has indicated that he has a three year arc planned. Sera Gamble never indicated that she had more than a year long arc. These long storyarcs are fairly loosely plotted. In the commentary on the season eight blu-ray of "Time After Time," executive producer Bob Singer states that when they broke the story about Henry Winchester and the Men of Letters at the heart of the episode, they had no idea that it would become a central piece of the mythology of *Supernatural* going forward. They thought it was an episode to fill in some back story. Singer indicates that the same serendipity happened during Kripke's tenure: they did not realize that a story point would be as important going forward until after the fact.

At the beginning of a season, the showrunner will usually break the major story points to the writers. Writers may be assigned specific stories to bring to script or they may break story ideas of their own.¹³ These ideas may be worked into the overall mytharc or they may appear as story of the week episodes. Typically, on *Supernatural*, writers return to the writers' room in late May or early June. This allows them to complete a few scripts before production begins in late June or early July. A script does not simply go from writers' room to set, however. There are notes from the network which must be taken into account. These notes may comment on costs, story points, or even lighting. Scripts must pass through a legal department for clearances as well. Scripts need to have guest stars cast, and the showrunner, along with the director of the episode, is responsible for casting. It is important for the showrunner to have approval over and input into casting - particularly in the case of a guest star who may become recurring or in the case of a character, such as has happened in *Supernatural* several times, who is a younger iteration of a character previously seen on the show, such as young Mary and John Winchester. Continuity is ultimately the responsibility of the showrunner. Other responsibilities include hiring directors and liaising with set during production.

¹³ Writers are encouraged to "pitch" or describe original story ideas that they have come up with on their own to the showrunner and/or the writers' room. This maximizes the creative output of the writers' room: they create individually, in teams, and as a whole.

Once the episode goes to production, it typically shoots for eight days. After the episode is shot, the director edits it and special effects and music are added. Typically, then there is a lag time of approximately three months between the start of shooting and the airing of the first episode. As the season progresses, this lag time does shorten, so that the final episode is usually shot approximately one month to six weeks before it airs. As production progresses, information on casting and scripts is leaked as “spoilers,” and engaged fans will speculate and comment on these spoilers, garnering interest even before the episode airs.

Fan engagement is a huge component of a show’s ultimate financial success. New paradigms have sprung up in how television is being delivered and how it is being monetized, such as through deals with iTunes, Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu. Producers, networks, and studios have realized the power of having an active and engaged fanbase. According to Jennifer Gillan,

Networks can offer narrowcast-broadcast series that are designed to attract not only the broad spectrum of viewers needed to make them mainstream Must-See TV, but also the narrowcast viewers who act as brand advocates for the series. Through the online platform, these viewers can jump into virtual discussions on message boards and, if necessary, join fan advocacy movements when a network threatens cancellation of TV shows that seem unpopular when measured by traditional ratings systems. (17)

The traditional ratings system is still a problem according to Henry Jenkins:

The technologies of ratings systems attempt to render the audience visible to the television industry....

This approximated television audience provides the industry with a manageable object it can measure, design programming for, and sell to advertisers....

Television networks *and* advertisers purchase the ratings from a single accredited supplier (Nielsen) with a longstanding interest in pleasing both. The resulting ratings system has an inertial that makes it difficult for new competitors and blocks significant shifts in the methods of measurement. The ratings system is configured to provide a consistent currency for business deals to be conducted, not primarily to provide an accurate account of all who watch. (emphasis in original *Spreadable* 118-9)

Jenkins notes that CBS was surprised in 2007 by the depth of support for *Jericho* when it was cancelled due to low Nielsen ratings. At the time, there was just no reliable way to

account for viewers who were DVRing¹⁴ or even using official streaming platforms to view the show (*Spreadable* 121-2). The grassroots movement of emails and shipping almost 25 tons of peanuts (a nod to a comment by a character on the show) to CBS resulted in the show being revived, but continued low Nielsen ratings resulted in its permanent cancellation. Jenkins points out that “[t]he depth of engagement from *Jericho* fans surprised them into bringing the program back for a limited run, but [the network] still measured success through an appointment model” (*Spreadable* 122). It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that viewers are dissatisfied with the “appointment model,” which allows the networks to determine when and where they can watch a show. There is increasing pressure for networks and cable providers to provide on demand content in which consumers choose only the programs they wish to watch (Lieberman). According to Jenkins,

only a few producers grasp what is at stake in shifting from an appointment-based to an engagement-based model, and only a few fans are experimenting with alternative ways of claiming the value their activities generate. Television networks have tried and failed... to lower the costs of appointment-based viewing; perhaps they would be better served by developing new ways of appraising engaged viewership. (*Spreadable* 124)

Jenkins is referring to fan works (*Spreadable*), but the pressure to engage with fans is real. Another form of currency that can be leveraged is that of having access to producers which increases a fan’s status in the eyes of other fans, as well as providing a dialogue which is also a large component of fan activity.

A shift has begun on the part of the networks and studios that acknowledges the demands of fans, defined as the most active viewers and therefore the most likely to be in dialogue with producers. Ernesto reports that “there is also a newer trend where pirates are viewed not so much as a problem, but as a challenge and an opportunity to improve legal offerings.” Further, he quotes David Kaplan, Chief of Anti-Piracy Operations at Warner Brothers, as noting that “Generally speaking, we view piracy as a proxy of consumer demand.” Nielsen began counting DVR viewing several seasons ago and track

¹⁴ Taping to watch later on a digital video recorder. In Canada, this is often referred to as a PVR: personal video recorder.

DVR +3, +7, and even +30. These numbers mean that they count viewers who watch the recorded show within 3, 7, and 30 days of recording the show's first airing. Nielsen is bowing to network demands for more accurate information on viewers and has announced plans to incorporate digital platforms, such as smartphone and tablet viewing, into their ratings data by 2014. According to Todd Spangler,

How big was the total audience for an individual episode or an entire season run, as seen on television, DVR, video-on-demand, websites, smartphones, tablets and other devices? And what's the composition of that audience? Today what's available are, at best, educated guesses. TV programmers have taken the lead in trying to solve this puzzle to support their advertising goals. (Spangler, "Can Nielsen")

Producers do not have to guess about fans who contact them. They are clearly watching the show and are eager to engage with it and be advocates for it. In August, Nielsen released a study on how Twitter drives viewership. They determined that there was a correlation but had no clear conclusions. What is clear from their results is that competitive reality shows had the highest correlation between viewing numbers and tweets as fans were eager to vote for their favorite competitors. This is more evidence that users of social media are motivated by the possibility of having a real influence on what they are watching (Spangler, "Twitter Drives").

Fans have learned that they can have an influence on the ultimate fate of a show, such as *Jericho*. Ross describes the impetus for fans to become actively involved in saving a show threatened with cancellation: "the story of their shows resonated with them in deeply personal ways, compelling them to do something they'd never done before and actively work to save their programs" (244). The success of campaigns for *Chuck*, *Jericho*, and *Farscape* help to reinforce for fans that the networks are listening to them, which in turn encourages more dialogue. With cult shows, which typically have a smaller and therefore less lucrative fanbase according to traditional methods of measurements, this fan support becomes crucial.

2.2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The primary theory and methodology employed is cultural discourse theory. Norman Fairclough's *Critical Discourse Analysis* provides a useful framework for

examining the relationship between fans and producers. In addition, Jean Baudrillard's theories surrounding the production and consumption of commodities particularly in the age of the Internet provides an important touchstone. The communication circuits of both Stuart Hall and Julie D'Acci help to develop a better understanding of the relationship between fans and producers. Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural production will inform the hegemonic relationship between fans and producers in a the broader context of the television landscape but also in the way that relationship can be expected to change over time: "the occupants of the dominant positions, especially in economic terms... are strongly homogeneous, the avant-garde positions, which are defined mainly negatively, by their opposition to the dominant positions, bring together for a certain time writers and artists from very different origins, whose interests will sooner or later diverge" (*Field of Cultural* 66). On a very basic level, those involved in making the show may leave to pursue other opportunities; fans may become more interested in other fandoms. On a deeper level, expectations about where the storyline should go and what elements should be emphasized may increasingly diverge as a television show progresses through multiple seasons.

John Fiske posits that Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital need to be expanded:

We need to extend the metaphor of cultural capital to include that of a popular cultural capital that has no equivalent in the material economy. Popular cultural capital is an accumulation of meanings and pleasures that serves the interests of the subordinated and powerless, or rather the disempowered, for few social groups are utterly without power. (18-9)

While fans have always had an economic role to play, they now also have cultural capital, which may also be seen as circling back to economic power when all fan interactions may be countable and result in advertising dollars. The important point is that the power between fans and producers is shifting. As fans gain more power, producers must work harder to obtain fan capital and therefore the producers relinquish control over the final product. This creates another layer in the communication models of Hall and D'Acci.

Baudrillard's basic position (*Consumer, Selected, Simulacra*) insists that the consumer is a passive recipient who has become increasingly isolated in the digital age. Meaning becomes embedded in signs and simulations which become the simulacrum

around which society now organizes. In the case of *Supernatural* there are signs contained within the show itself which point to a more active and engaged community of consumers. Baudrillard presents significant insight into the convergence of consumer and producer, however. For Baudrillard, resistance happens at the site of irony and culture jamming, a kind of hyper-reality which is beyond anything that makes sense and may implode upon itself:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of the truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. (*Simulacra 2*)

Baudrillard posits that the medium has also been subsumed by this movement away from the real and into the hyper-real. The television medium through fan engagement has become the hyper-real.

The viewer is no longer a spectator but a part of the spectacle itself. Baudrillard posits that “[i]t is the whole traditional world of causality that is in question: the perspectival, determinist mode, the ‘active’ critical mode, the analytic mode – the distinction between cause and effect” (*Simulacra 30*). Baudrillard concludes that “no matter what the domain – political, biological, psychological, mediated – in which the distinction between these two poles can no longer be maintained, one enters into simulation, and thus into absolute manipulation – not into passivity, but into *the indifferenciation of the active and the passive*” (*Simulacra*, emphasis in original, 31). The developing relationship between fan and producer certainly allows for the spectator to become part of the spectacle itself, and *Supernatural* is a unique example of this as it incorporates fans within the very show itself in episodes like “The Real Ghostbusters”(5.09) and “Sympathy for the Devil”(5.01). While there may be a certain amount of manipulation of fans by producers, it is by no means absolute, and this relationship in *Supernatural* is far from passive or unaware of its own dynamics.

Both Baudrillard and Fairclough arguably utilize a “transdisciplinary” approach (Fairclough, *Cultural Discourse Analysis*, 1). Fairclough’s version of cultural discourse analysis (CDA) is “a methodology which is oriented to constructing objects of research through theorizing research topics in dialogue with other areas of social theory and research, and selecting methods which are in part inherent to this version of CDA and in part dependent upon the particular object of research” (20). Thus, within the framework of Fairclough, I will incorporate Bourdieu, Baudrillard, Hall, D’Acci, Jenkins, and others as appropriate to understand both the influences on production and the influences on fandom, as well as the communication practices between the two groups. Unlike Baudrillard, Fairclough’s conclusions are more positive, allowing for a greater possibility in shifts of hegemonic orders and positive outcomes creatively. While there are several kinds of discourse that articulate with cultural theory, this thesis will employ critical discourse analysis as outlined by Fairclough (“Cultural Discourse Analysis,” *Analyzing Discourse*).

Fairclough points out that social change leads to changes in discourse which lead to changes in other elements of social life. A critical analysis of the text itself provides an analysis of cultural practices. According to Fairclough,

Texts... are the semiotic elements of social events, and it helps... if we think of them in process terms as ‘texturing’: social agents draw upon social structures (including languages) and practices (including orders of discourse) in producing texts, but actively work these ‘resources’, create (potentially novel) texts out of them, rather than simply instantiating them. (5)

Fans and producers communicate with each other through a variety of texts. In addition, fans may have knowledge/insight/access to some texts that are production specific while producers may access texts that are primarily considered fan texts. The primary text that will be examined will be the series itself, but in addition, other texts that will be considered include direct interaction between producers and fans such as through social media or at conventions, fan forums, and both industry and fan blogs. To the extent that they may be available, industry contracts may also be examined for the changing role between production and fans.

Furthermore, Fairclough states that “changes in semiosis (orders of discourse) are a precondition for wider processes of social change – for example, an elaborated network

of genres is a precondition for ‘globalisation’ if one understands the latter as including enhancement of possibilities for ‘action at a distance’, and the spatial ‘stretching’ of relations of power.”¹⁵ Certainly, this resonates in the context of the relationship between fans and producers and is particularly pertinent at this time when the Internet facilitates a globalisation of content and interaction. It is possible for fans to assert action at a distance and to increase the attention and power they receive through these interactions with both themselves and the producers. As has already been explored, global distribution is a major consideration for producers. Fairclough also outlines the inculcation of discourse as “a matter of people coming to ‘own’ discourses, to position themselves inside them” (7). Certainly, fans of *Supernatural* have a very proprietary attitude toward the show which is largely fostered by the producers. Fairclough delineates that a “stage towards inculcation is rhetorical deployment: people may learn new discourses and use them for certain purposes” (7). Fans of *Supernatural* in particular have fostered a close relationship with the production/writers from learning about the production itself to reaching out to open discourse with the production/writers. This discourse is largely facilitated and fostered by the online environment and Twitter in particular, which was not available prior to 2006. The production/writers are increasingly more aware of fans as the most active viewers, and it facilitates the purpose of production’s goal of renewal and remuneration to foster discourse with fans.

Fairclough also identifies that “[i]n circumstances of social crisis or instability, different groups of social agents develop different strategies for change” (7-8). The current crisis in the entertainment industry as broadcast television attempts to adapt to the increasingly digital environment has sparked a new relationship with fans and *Supernatural* provides an excellent case study to examine how these changes may impact on the storytelling of television, itself. Fairclough also stresses that “[w]hich strategies (and discourses) succeed, become hegemonic, and become operationalized in new realities depends on a variety of conditions” (8). Whether a closer discourse with fans will ultimately succeed in increasing the monetization of television and the satisfaction

¹⁵ Fairclough, *Cultural Discourse Analysis*, citing A. Giddons. 1990. *Modernity and Self Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 5.

level of fans is an ongoing question, but *Supernatural* would suggest that there are satisfactions on both sides. It also remains to be seen if the special conditions surrounding *Supernatural* would be translatable to television in general. One of the advantages to a cult show in this instance is that its fanbase is smaller and, therefore, more manageable insofar as having meaningful reciprocal communication. The larger the number of followers on Twitter, for instance, the less likely one's tweet to a celebrity will either be seen or responded to.

Julie D'Acci's circuit of media studies builds on the encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall. She carefully expands or widens the circuit through incorporation of Richard Johnson's model and that of the Open University. While D'Acci's expanded model takes into consideration a much wider range of texts, such as suggested by Fairclough, and the model incorporates a greater inter-relationship between the points of the circuit, the model still fails to really examine what the production side of the circuit does with the messages it receives to the extent that those messages are then reflected in the artifact itself.

Less traditional academic sources, such as blogs and wikis, will provide useful material on fan, audience and media studies, as well as on *Supernatural* specifically and the fan/producer relationship. Superwiki is a site dedicated to the show and provides a repository of information on the production, episodes, and fan reception. In addition, this source provides links to a wide range of other texts that illustrate the relationship between fans and producers of *Supernatural*. The site is utilized by fans and producers, actors and visual effects crew.¹⁶ A number of scholars maintain blogs which feature interviews and articles on fans and fan studies (Jenkins, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*; Baym, *Online Fandom*; Mittel, *Just TV*). Texts from new media provide particularly pertinent observations on the fan/production relationship in that context.

¹⁶ This assertion by series star Jared Padalecki at the Vancouver Creation Entertainment *Supernatural* Convention on August 25, 2013 was tweeted by @Superwiki the owner of *Superwiki* on August 25, 2013. See the video here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3VQ568pcbE>. See also note 10 in Chapter one. In addition, actor Olivia Cheng who played Susan in season seven told Suzette Clark in an interview that she researched her role as a Leviathan on Superwiki. "Super Women: *Supernatural*'s Susan." *Sequential Tart*. January 23, 2012. <http://www.sequentialtart.com/article.php?id=2164>. Accessed October 1, 2013.

The above theoretical frameworks are used in the following chapters to examine the text of *Supernatural* closely, utilizing Fairclough's critical analysis to shed light on the larger cultural issues. This analysis enables conclusions to help illustrate how this interaction has been successful for fans and producers and to how the interaction has been less than salutary. In conducting this analysis, it is important to isolate other influences on the text, such as genre expectations, for example horror tropes or production constraints. All of these factors contribute to the forces at work in the flow of D'Acci's communication model. The next chapter will turn to the role of the showrunner in crafting the text with a particular focus on the production influences on the fan/producer relationship.

3 In It For the Long Haul: Showrunning *Supernatural*

The success or failure of a television show rests largely on the shoulders of the showrunner, who is in charge of maintaining the creative vision of the show.

Showrunners are, not surprisingly, often the creators of the show, as was Eric Kripke, showrunner seasons one to five, on *Supernatural*. Showrunners oversee every aspect of the writing of the show, from hiring the writers to negotiating with networks and studios over notes to seeing the scripts through production, as discussed in the previous chapter. Phalen and Osellame point out that “Ultimately, the showrunner is responsible for the tone of the writers’ room and for the script that comes from it” (13). Michael Z. Newman recognizes that the showrunner needs to balance concerns of studios, networks, and advertisers by attracting and maintaining an audience through the ebb and flow of the television season. Caldwell points out that these pressures may see the showrunner stifle the creativity that comes out of pitch sessions with writers to satisfy corporate demands (60). There is pressure from above to cultivate a relationship with the fans. Andrejevic points out that “the more the boundary between the ‘offstage’ site of production and that of consumption is eroded, the greater the sense of participation-based loyalty” (31). Deery points out that in the past, “direct audience influence has been largely restricted and largely under producer control” (168). However, more recently, according to Deery, “the Web enables private reactions to become public and acquire currency and weight”(168). Financial concerns create the need to build in episodes that will attract fans and new viewers at specific points in the television season, particularly sweeps week.¹⁷ Phalen and Osellame also stress that “Television screenwriting is a creative occupation functioning within the structure of an economic institution” (5). Ultimately, however, “Television series are created by someone with a vision for the show, and it is the showrunner’s job to communicate this vision to the writing staff” (Phalen and Osellame 7). Writing for television is very much a collaborative effort.

Newman has identified three levels of storytelling in television: the “beat” or scene, the episode, and the multi-episode arc. While showrunners will have input into all

¹⁷ According to Jeremy Butler, “**sweeps** Time period during which Nielsen Media Research conducts seasonal *ratings* of network television programs” (emphasis in original 468).

these levels, their other duties usually mean they will have less influence on the micro-level of story-telling, like the beats, and more influence at the macro-level of the season story arc. Booth points out that “a show is narratively complex if it rejects the need for closure after every episode, allows for the development of an overarching story to develop across episodes, and creates an elaborate, interconnected network of characters, actions, locations, props, and plots” (371). The more complex the narrative and the more use that is made out of the three levels of storytelling, the more difficult the showrunner’s task is to remain successful. *Supernatural* makes use of all these levels. Logically the creator of a show would have the clearest vision of the component elements, so what are the implications when the creator is no longer the showrunner? Eric Kripke had been followed by two showrunners: Sera Gamble and Jeremy Carver both of whom he hired initially as writers on the show. Is the new showrunner more likely to be influenced by fan interactions? How much influence does the new showrunner have on the continued success or failure of a show once the creator has left the building? Kripke has remained on as a creative consultant, and Bob Singer has collaborated with all three. Do fans’ expectations of the showrunner change? In what ways does a new showrunner transform or adapt the original vision and still maintain the success of the show? At what point do fans have the most influence in this process and where is that influence to be seen in the finished product?

Supernatural provides an interesting case study. Creator Eric Kripke was also showrunner for the first five seasons of the show. He was replaced at the end of season five by Sera Gamble, who was showrunner for seasons six and seven. Jeremy Carver took over the reins as showrunner in season eight. This chapter looks at the three showrunners in terms of relative success in maintaining a storyarc over the course of a season or multiple seasons and how those seasons relate to the original concept as perceived by Kripke. *Supernatural* has remained a viable show for the CW¹⁸ network but the ratings

¹⁸ The CW is the fifth largest network in the United States and was formed in 2006 by a merger between the WB network and UPN. It is jointly owned by CBS and Time Warner. *Supernatural* is produced by Warner Bros. Studio. Clearly, the showrunner of *Supernatural* is uniquely required to answer to many masters. Most shows have a more direct line between corporate parent, network, and studio. See Gray, *Television Entertainment*, especially Table 3.1, 84.

fell during Gamble's tenure as showrunner. Since Carver stepped in as showrunner, the ratings have risen to levels rivalling Kripke's tenure. This thesis looks at the different factors which may influence the success or failure of a showrunner as well as differences in storytelling, such as narrative structure, tone, and character development, which resulted in Kripke's strong five year vision and a weaker vision for seasons six and seven. Showrunners must be aware of fan reception in trying to maximize viewership to satisfy the economic imperatives of the industry.

D'Acci would describe the place occupied by the showrunner as site of convergence of a number of different discursive practices (433). Many of these are the traditional conversations between studios and production or various aspects of the production over the course of a day. However, fan voices are becoming increasingly important in the changing communication circuit. According to D'Acci, "the hegemonic status of any discourse is, by its very nature, always open to change, negotiation, and displacement" (435). Fairclough identifies that social change results in changes in discourse ("Cultural Discourse Analysis" 1). The increasing importance of the digital environment and the recognition of its importance by both fans and producers has resulted in such a shift. Fairclough states that "[o]perationalization includes materialization of discourse"(6). That is all this discourse results in the show itself. It is important to remember, Fairclough points out "[w]hich strategies (and discourses) succeed, become hegemonic, and become operationalized in new realities depends upon a variety of conditions" (8). In this case, the new realities include the economic condition of the television industry and the easy access provided by the Internet.

What exactly is a showrunner? Most frequently the showrunner is also the creator of a show and is the person who oversees the day-to-day production of all elements of the show, including staffing the writers' room. As already pointed out, the showrunner is the person who is responsible for the overall tone and direction of a show. While he or she may not write every episode, he or she guides the writing of each episode and oversees the process of breaking episodes. Phalen and Osellame emphasize the importance of the showrunner:

The primary function of the writers' room is to serve the vision of the showrunner, who sets the tone of the room, communicating expectations by rewarding writers who meet them and marginalizing or firing writers who don't.

The showrunner also has to react to pressures from external groups, like studio and network executives, as well as from the writers themselves. When s/he is organized, present, and supportive, the process is efficient in producing scripts to meet production deadlines. And an efficient room contributes not only to the success of a program but to the quality of work life experienced by the writers. (17)

Phalen and Ossellame also point out that the genre of a show influences the dynamic in the writers' room as well. Drama, which emphasizes emotion and character development, tends to encourage a more solitary writing process than comedy, but it also depends on collaboration for continuity in drama that takes place over longer arcs. Phalen and Ossellame refer to this as "institutional memory" (9); *Supernatural* is lucky enough to have an additional resource in this respect in First Assistant Director Kevin Parks. Parks has been with the show since the "Pilot" episode and has earned the nickname "Parksapedia" for his encyclopedic memory of the show (Superwiki). It is widely touted that Parks can even remember the weather on any given day of shooting, even those from season one. Even with this show-related information source on set, production will still turn to Superwiki for verification and fact checking about the show.

It is important for the writers' room to be staffed with people who can bring as varied a spectrum of perspectives as possible for maximum creativity, but this element can also lead to personality conflicts which the showrunner then needs to manage. *Supernatural*, while primarily a drama, is also known for its comedic episodes and writer Ben Edlund in particular is known for his quirky story ideas for episodes such as "Wishful Thinking"(4.08), "Clap Your Hands If You Believe"(6.09, see figure 1), and "The French Mistake"(6.15, see figure 1). In setting the tone of his writers' room, one of the first things Kripke did was to set up a tiki bar, a place to gather informally, indicating his approach would be informal and collaborative. This attitude seems to have been extended to input from fans as well, at least through a sensitivity to fan reaction in the early seasons. As mentioned earlier, fan and writer interaction has taken place more directly through social media and Twitter, in particular.¹⁹ None of the showrunners has

¹⁹ Jim Michaels, for instance, was named as one of the Top 20 Showrunners on Twitter in 2012 by TV Guide (Superwiki). It is becoming coming common practice for actors, in particular, to live tweet as the show airs. Jared Padalecki and Osric Chau have regularly tweeted episodes in the beginning of season nine.

ever made use of Twitter accounts to facilitate this kind of communication, but they would certainly have been aware of their writers having such contact. Having become acquainted through Twitter, the administrator of Superwiki was invited to visit the writers in their offices in the summer of 2013 for instance (Superwiki).

Writing begins in the writers' room as the major story and character arcs are worked out and the plan for where the series will go takes shape. Newman points out that "When writing staffs begin work on a season they will sometimes plot out the major developments of the whole year of shows" (25). The *Supernatural* writers' room has a white board (Superwiki) with both the broad strokes of the major story arc and individual ideas for standalone episodes²⁰ that may or may not be used. Sometimes an idea may get bumped to a subsequent season. How much input various writers will have will vary, but the showrunner has the final say. Often, the showrunner already has an idea of the broad strokes for individual episodes. Caldwell explains that "[w]riting by committee assumes that a show's main story arcs are well known and established, usually in a written document called the show's 'bible.' Any necessary backstory is therefore codified to ensure continuity in all future scripts" (60). Clearly, the longer a story is on the air and the bigger the 'bible' becomes, the more difficult it becomes to maintain that strict continuity. Kripke maintains that he had a five year arc worked out from the beginning (Superwiki). Carver has indicated that he has a three year arc in mind. Gamble, on the other hand, referred only to one year arcs. Individual episodes are often assigned to writers, or writers may pitch story ideas. When ideas are collaborated on in the writers' room, it allows for a "variety of ideas and perspectives contributing to the final product"

Clark Gregg does this for *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* as another example. Perhaps most surprisingly, Orlando Jones who stars in *Sleepy Hollow* and has never been on *Supernatural*, started live-tweeting episodes of *Supernatural* in the fall of 2013. He was immediately embraced by the *Supernatural* fans, many of whom already watch *Sleepy Hollow*, but the interaction will no doubt lead to some *Supernatural* fans tuning in to *Sleepy Hollow* who might not have otherwise. Furthermore, this interaction led to Henry Jenkins inviting Jones to speak to his class on fandom in the spring of 2014 at the University of Southern California. The invitation was extended and accepted over Twitter.

²⁰ Stand alone episodes do not require extended knowledge of previous episodes for the casual viewer to understand the action and enjoy the episode.

(Phalen and Osellame 8). A writer begins with a “beat sheet” that lays out the sequence of events. Other writers, the showrunner and the studio and network may all give notes before the writer then writes an outline and then the first draft of the script with each step following a similar pattern. According to Phalen and Osellame, “In drama, the writer generally works with the showrunner to revise the script as many times as necessary. Sometimes the showrunner takes over the process and writes the final draft – not an optimum scenario, given the production demands on the showrunner’s time”(8). In an interview, Canadian showrunner of the freshman series²¹ *Bitten*, Daegen Fryklind, cites the workload as the biggest challenge to showrunning(Wild). *Supernatural*, in particular, puts more demands on its showrunner due to the added demands of special effects, few to no standing sets, and shooting in a different country among other things. Special effects alone require extra time for production and clearances from censors to be within accepted parameters. This involves ensuring there is enough post-production time for the effects to be added and it involves having to deal with notes from the studio or network and dealing with the censors if there is a problem. Special effects are such a big part of *Supernatural* that the fans have also embraced the effects team. There is a great deal of communication with fans over Twitter and the effects team even held their own mini-convention after the larger annual fan convention in Vancouver in August 2013 (Superwiki). Showrunners naturally have an ongoing dialogue with the effects team which includes input into the final production and story. Ironically, a good showrunner cannot spend all of his or her time writing.

Understanding the rhythm of the writing of a television series is crucially important to understanding how a fan can influence the text of an episode or the overall storyarc. In general, they will have a better chance of influencing the longer arc. Stories are broken or assigned and then, usually, the writers go off and write the first draft on their own, coming back for notes from the showrunner and the network. Then the script goes to production. Casting of guest roles is done, locations scouted, and so forth. Then the episode is actually shot, and finally the episode goes into post-production for effects, music and so on (Phalen and Osellame; Brett Martin; Grey, *Television Entertainment*;

²¹ In its first broadcast season.

Superwiki). This entire process usually means that there is approximately four months between the script being started and the episode airing. This time generally shortens significantly as the season progresses. Some ways that fans have been able to influence scripts before they even come to air is via leaked information from sides of the script used for auditions or press releases or even, more recently, tweets from production. This also allows the showrunner to gauge audience reception of some plot points. However, in general, the majority of response is not garnered until after the show has aired. At that point, the showrunner may “course correct” (see Kripke quote on page 1 of this thesis).

In order to understand the showrunner’s influence, it is important to have a sense of what may be within the showrunner’s control and what may be dictated by outside forces. According to Newman, there are two basic structures to television dramas: the serial and the episodic. The serial is a “long form drama,” while in the episodic “all of the problems raised in the beginning of an episode are solved by the end and questions do not dangle week after week” (Newman 16). A serial will generate loyalty, particularly to character as this is a narrative element that is particularly well-served by this form. On the other hand, the casual viewer will have a much more difficult time simply tuning in as there will be some expectation of familiarity with the characters and on-going plot elements. According to Newman, episodic dramas have traditionally done exceptionally well in syndication, for example, and television is increasingly looking to revenue streams beyond first run advertising sales. It is important to appreciate that each season in a serial is made up of both “myth-arc” episodes – those that advance the on-going plot – and those that are standalone or, in the case of *Supernatural*, “monster of the week” episodes (see figure 1) in an attempt to balance the enjoyment of long-term and casual viewers. The season is also subject to outside, commercial forces, such as “sweeps weeks” in November, March, and May when networks pay particular attention to ratings and showrunners are under pressure to produce particularly provocative episodes to capture a larger market share that will help to set the advertising rate for the next season (Newman 24).

Traditionally, seasons have run from September through May. Series only make, on average, 22 or 23 episodes per season, which means there are several stretches of weeks with no new episode. *Supernatural* fans have come up with their own terminology

for such hiatus breaks: hellatus. With an on-going storyline, there is the very real possibility that the audience may lose interest during the break or simply lose the thread of the story. With the rise of services such as Netflix, audiences have been able to postpone viewing shows until the entire season appears, and they can watch it all at once. Netflix's highly successful original program *House of Cards* had all twelve of its original episodes available at once to capitalize on the audience's desire for what is called "binge" viewing.²² Other new models that feed into the growing desire for binge viewing are being adopted by mainstream network television. Some series are following the model preferred by cable stations that offer only 10 to 13 episodes and run them without repeats in a continuous run. This technique will help viewers to remember storyline threads. Of course, the possible negative side of that for writers and showrunners is that viewers will be much more likely to catch inconsistencies and may, therefore, be more critical. However, just as novelists ensure readers do not put their book down, television writers will continue to rely on the cliffhanger to keep viewers' attention.

In applying textual analysis to television studies, Jeremy Butler turns to authorship studies and specifically to the auteur theory. According to Butler, "Recognizing the diminished power of the director, television auteurism has taken a different tack and focused instead on the 'vision' of producers and so-called showrunners (producers who are responsible for the ongoing production of a program)" (368). There are three main points of discussion. The first line of inquiry is "how an auteur's thematic, narrative structure, and stylistic techniques – the use of sound and image – are expressed in individual programs"(368). The second line of inquiry examines the auteur's entire career, and the third line of inquiry casts him as someone who must fight against the system to bring his art to light.

Supernatural has always been an expensive show to produce between the classic rock it privileges on its soundtrack to the numerous special effects and stunts necessary for a show grounded in horror and the supernatural. The show has always been on the smallest network, first the WB and then the CW. Network executives have frequently not

²² Binge viewing is the practice of watching an entire series or season of a series in one continuous run during a compressed time frame. This time frame may be a single day or week.

understood the genre as was hilariously parodied in the season two episode, “Hollywood Babylon”(2.18). In the episode, which features a ghost haunting the set of a horror movie, a studio executive asks the director if the movie needs to be so “dark,” a note that was passed to *Supernatural* from their own studio. Fans nervously awaited news of renewal in early seasons. While Dawn Osteroff was President of the CW, *Supernatural* never seemed to receive much support or promotion. On the other hand, Mark Pedowitz, the current network President, has been quite vocal in supporting the program and even admitting he is a fan of the show (Gelman). Under Pedowitz, *Supernatural* received its earliest renewal for season nine. Kripke, as showrunner under Osteroff, dealt with most of the uneasy relationship between studio and production, bringing his own original idea to the screen. Gamble and Carver’s own experiences benefitted from Kripke forging the way for them. There has also been a noticeable falling off of classic rock on the show, however, and this may be an indication that Gamble and Carver have not been as willing to argue with the studio over the cost of the music as they are not as invested in Kripke’s original vision. Kripke somewhat infamously included the following stage direction in an early draft of the “Pilot” script: “CUE MUSIC And you can take your anemic alternative pop and shove it up your ass. Dean plays bass thumping, pile driving Zeppelin, and he plays it loud.” At the 2006 Paley panel²³, Kripke stated that music “was something that was really important to me, coming into the Pilot” (Superwiki). Fans have also been very vocal in asking for more classic rock on the show in recent years. According to Superwiki, “At Salute to Supernatural L.A. 2011 Jensen [Ackles] explained that the complaints had been heeded, and that efforts were being made to bring more rock back into the soundtrack.” This is yet another integral part of the series’ creation that fans have embraced. Music in any television show can be an important part of the way the story is told.

Looking at each showrunner’s career path yields some interesting distinctions among them. Typically, showrunners’ contracts are for three to five years. Few shows are

²³ The Paley Center for Media hosts a Paleyfest each year to which various shows are invited to form a panel of the stars and producers to showcase the show itself and interact with fans. Most often critically acclaimed or show with active fan bases are invited to participate. <http://www.paleycenter.org/>

successful enough to stay on the air for longer than that. If a show is that successful, it is of mutual benefit to both the showrunner and the studio to have the successful showrunner go on to create more successful franchises. While all three *Supernatural* showrunners began as writers, Kripke had already established himself as an executive producer on the WB show *Tarzan*. During this time, he became known as a good writer and an extremely hard worker, leading the network to solicit ideas from him for an original series. Because Kripke had not been a showrunner before, the network paired Bob Singer with him to help him learn the ropes. Sera Gamble came directly out of the *Supernatural* writers' room, but again, she was paired with Bob Singer to help her learn the process. According to one article, Gamble opted not to renew her contract at the end of season seven (Andreeva). Interestingly, the same article identifies Jeremy Carver as the new *Co*-showrunner. Jeremy Carver was a writer for *Supernatural* for seasons three to five, and he co-wrote his first episode, "Sin City"(3.04), with Singer. After season five, Carver left to showrun the American version of *Being Human* with his wife Anna Fricke. While the first season of the American *Being Human* followed the original British version to some extent, it definitely broke away from the original to carve its own narrative path. Fricke is now showrunning *Being Human* on her own. Carver then came back to *Supernatural* with experience at showrunning and at carrying someone else's vision forward. He is listed as co-showrunner with Bob Singer.

Each showrunner has also expressed respect for fans and their opinions, though it would be impolitic of them not to given the economic imperative to do so. Reporting from the 2009 *Supernatural* panel at San Diego Comic Con, Marisa Roffman relates that "Eric admits he has a 'tempestuous, loving, conflicting' relationship with the online *Supernatural* fan community, and that the meta episode, 'The Monster at the End of This Book'(4.18), gave him a chance to lovingly make fun of them" (Roffman, "Comic-Con"). There is an awareness among showrunners of the increasing power of fans. Sera Gamble remarked,

We love the fans. That's the thing about writing on a genre show. I'm a genre fan. I will boldly admit to being a life-long Trekkie. I was born and bred on the cheesy rock [set] and William Shatner. So I am well aware of what it is to be part of a fandom. And fandom is defined by meticulous care and really giving a shit and having strong opinions and arguing. It's a community with opinions. If they were in a room they'd be fist-fighting some of the time. You know, the Sam-girls and

the Dean-girls would be like pulling each other's hair, some of them! That goes with the territory, and it's also immensely rewarding because they're giving a shit and they're paying attention. (Superwiki)

Carver also acknowledges the power of the digital environment combined with fan enthusiasm for the boost in ratings seen by the show in season eight: "It's really a testament to the incredible fans that we have.... I think they have such a strong presence online, whether it be Tumblr, or the various boards, or even on Twitter, that I think other folks are catching that level of excitement and it's really, really exciting" (S. Booth; Bricker). While Carver is certainly as aware of fan engagement, he at least began by acknowledging fan preferences even while somewhat discounting them. When asked about introducing a love interest for Sam in season eight, Carver commented:

I think being away, when I came back, I looked at it with those [fresh] eyes and went, "Why wouldn't he [have a relationship]?" And then someone reminded me, "Because...there are about 15 million people who don't want him to." [Laughs] And I think it's very organic, I think this season is very organic. I think it's a very interesting relationship people are going to get. It's SUPERNATURAL. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it was worth doing. (Roffman "Endgame," brackets in original)

Carver is clearly aware of typical fan response to love interests being negative. However, it is also interesting to note that the character Amelia disappears by the middle of the season after extremely poor fan reception. While the producers may push the boundaries of creativity in introducing new characters, they are listening to how those characters are being received. If showrunners were solely concerned with the economics of retaining their fans, it is unlikely that they would keep trying to introduce women characters into the storyline as richly and frequently as they do. Showrunners are still concerned with the story itself.

In the forward to *The Essential Supernatural*, Eric Kripke credits a team of people with helping to create the distinctive style of *Supernatural*. His first acknowledgement is to "Jerry Wanek, the brilliant production designer who's defined the visual style of this show as much as anybody" (10). In addition, he mentions the importance of Serge Ladouceur, the director of photography and director Phil Sgriccia who has overseen the editing of every episode. Executive Producer Bob Singer, Kripke tells the reader, has "created this show every bit as much as I have" and he deserves more credit (10). In fact,

Kripke credits Singer with teaching him everything he knows. Singer has had very little direct contact with fans though he has sat on various panels at Paleyfest and Comic-Con in San Diego. However, Singer appeared on stage with stars Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki at the Creation Salute to *Supernatural* convention in Vancouver in August of 2013. Singer was not an official guest but took the stage at Ackles and Padalecki's invitation, initiating direct fan interaction and fielding audience questions. He also took over doing producer promotions from Sera Gamble.

Kripke also acknowledges writer Ben Edlund as “the most talented writer I know... what people don't realize is how disciplined he is with structure and character. And how behind the scenes, he's helped to craft countless episodes”(10). Sera Gamble is singled out for her talent in creating dialogue. Finally, Kripke also mentions Kim Manners who was the in-house director in Vancouver and essentially oversaw every director during the first four seasons of the show. Manners, who passed away in the middle of season four, is none the less credited with shaping the stylistic atmosphere of the show. Much of the look and feel of the show is owed to Manners' nine seasons on *The X-Files* (Knight 41). These comments underscore the collaborative nature of the creation of the series. This collaboration extends to the fans. Many of those on the creative team regularly tweet with fans (Jerry Wanek, Kevin Parks, and producer Jim Michaels are just three examples) and discuss the show with them at conventions, especially the annual convention in Vancouver. Several of those credited with helping to create the show have gone on to take responsibility for creating on a different level through directing. To date, Singer has directed twenty-six episodes. Edlund directed in both season six, “The Man Who Would Be King” (6.20), and season seven, “Reading is Fundamental” (7.21). Incidentally, Edlund also wrote those two episodes. Jerry Wanek directed “The Slice Girls” (7.13) in season seven. Ladouceur directed “As Time Goes By”(8.12), and Kevin Parks directed “Trial and Error” (8.14). The other first assistant director, Johnny MacCarthy, who does the even numbered episodes to Parks' odd, directed “The Girl With the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo” (7.20). Kripke also directed “What Is and What Should Never Be” (2.20) and season four's “Lucifer Rising” (4.22). Gamble has never directed and to date neither has Carver.

Given the very collaborative nature of the production team of *Supernatural* and the consistency of having so many key positions filled by the same individuals over the eight seasons, the most significant place to look for differences between Kripke, Gamble and Carver as showrunners is the writers' room and the stories that flowed from it.²⁴

During Kripke's time as showrunner, the writers' room was staffed with between seven and fourteen writers. Kripke described the collaborative process in an interview:

We have about five seasons worked out, but those are the roughest cocktail-napkin sketches of a road map. We know roughly where we want to shake out every season, and we know roughly some of the major turning points we want to hit. But you leave that road map very intentionally blank because so much gets filled in in the day-to-day, and you just have to allow for the happy accidents and the pleasures of discovery when you find a character who really works for you. For instance, when you find a storyline that you really like--we have this brilliant group of writers who are constantly coming up with this stuff--you have to give the writers the freedom to fill in the blanks because they'll come up with stuff much better than anything you ever originally conceived. (Surette)

Season one had the most writers and Kripke himself wrote five of those episodes, including the "Pilot" (1.01), "Wendigo" (1.02), which turned out to be the first episode, though not filmed first, and "Devil's Trap" (1.22), the season finale. In subsequent seasons, Kripke wrote only the first and last episodes of each season, giving him the greatest control over the episodes that set the stage for the coming season and tied the storylines up at the end of each season. The only exception to this was the episode "The Real Ghostbusters" (5.09) in season five. The story itself came from Nancy Weiner but Kripke was given the writing credit for the episode (Superwiki). The episode is about Sam and Dean Winchester going to a fan convention for the books written about their lives by the prophet Chuck Shurley. It is a significant episode because the episode paints a sympathetic picture of fans, something that fans of the show felt was lacking in the show's first foray into fandom in season four's "The Monster at the End of This Book" (4.18), which was also a story by Nancy Weiner with the teleplay from Julie Siege. The season seven episode "Season Seven: Time for a Wedding" (7.08), written by Andrew Dabb and Daniel Loflin, also concerned superfan Becky Rosen, but this episode was not

²⁴ Information on who wrote which episode can be found on Superwiki, the DVDs, and Internet Movie Database (IMDb) for the show: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/>

at all well received by fans as it portrayed fans in a very unfavorable light. Interestingly, even Emily Perkins, the actor who played Becky, remarked at a fan convention that she was a bit taken aback by the less friendly characterization in season seven. In the season nine episode, “Slumber Party”(9.04), there is a reference to Becky that is very sympathetic and may be an attempt to respond to that criticism. While this thesis is not considering season nine in general, this episode is important as the first and so far only mention of this character by Carver.

Gamble’s room had thirteen writers in season six and twelve in season seven. During Kripke’s tenure, Gamble wrote the second last episode in seasons one through five and wrote the second episode of seasons three to five, giving her considerable input into how major stories were set up and wrapped up. In season six, she wrote three episodes. Curiously, she did not write the final episode of the season, Kripke did. Kripke was kept on as an executive producer in season six, and his stepping in to write the final episode is a good indication that the story arc needed to be put back on track. While the writing process is collaborative, the writer given credit for an episode is the lead writer for that episode and is, therefore, more responsible for the content of that episode than anyone else. In season seven, Gamble wrote four episodes, including the first and last episodes. Given the demands of showrunning, it seems likely that Gamble may have spent too much time on her own writing, instead of delegating and overseeing the work of others.

Carver’s writers’ room to date has only eight writers. All of the writers have written for the show in previous seasons. Adam Glass and Robbie Thompson were hired by Gamble, but the other five were hired by Kripke and wrote under him. To date, Carver has only written the first and last episode of season eight and the first episode of season nine in his tenure as showrunner. The smaller the number of writers, the more likely that each will be consulted about each episode, and the fewer episodes the showrunner writes him or herself, the more time the showrunner has to oversee the writing of others.

Michael Newman identifies a number of elements that contribute to successful television storytelling in “From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative.” In addition to close attention to the three levels of storytelling – the beat, episode, and season arc – redundancies, resolutions, coherence, and attention to character are all

important elements. A series needs to satisfy both long time viewers and casual viewers. Redundancies and stand alone episodes encourage casual viewers to tune in as they will still be able to follow and enjoy a single episode. *Supernatural* helps the casual viewer by beginning each episode with a “previously on” montage, identified by a “THEN” title card. Fans have come to expect the traditional season montage at the beginning of each finale that is set to Kansas’ “Carry On My Wayward Son”: one more example of how important the music is to the series. In fact, this song has become such a favorite that it is traditionally the first song sung at the karaoke event at every *Supernatural* convention. Since season one, a number of episodes have been “monster-of-the-week” stories which may contain some brief mention to the season long arc but are basically standalone episodes, such as “Provenance” (1.19) from season one, “The Usual Suspects” (2.07) in season two, “Fallen Idols”(5.05) in season five, “Weekend at Bobby’s” (6.04) in season six, or “LARP and the Real Girl” (8.11) from season eight.²⁵ Even the standalone episodes may contain a brief reference to a major story arc or at least touch on a recurring theme, family being the thread that runs most predominantly through all eight seasons, thus also providing coherence. The standalone episodes have the advantage of providing closure at the end, but even questions posed by the season long arcs can be answered at regular intervals giving a sense of closure as the season progresses as well. New questions can be posed as old questions are answered to help propel the story forward.

Newman points out that “What distinguishes most [Prime Time Serials] from other forms of programming is the way it is invested in character”(25). Character is a through line that also helps to drive the story forward. It is important for there to be a clear sense of continuity and logical development. Bob Singer describes the working relationship between himself and Kripke at the 2006 Paley Panel:

I come in from a characters’ point of view, it’s all about characters to me and I let the plot work itself out, given what the characters are gonna do and what I’m interested in the scenes that drive the plot but I’m mostly interested in how the characters react to it. Eric works very hard on the stories and gets the plot done and once the plot is good, the character stuff would come naturally. So we sort of go in a circle when we are in a room together and we arrive at this place where

²⁵ See also Figure 1 for a visual representation on how these episodes fit into the overall season and the narrative building of the mytharc.

both things are serviced and we are really a one voice now, we rarely disagree on stuff. (Superwiki)

Kripke has been cited as saying that it took them some time in the first season to realize that what the show was really about was not monsters but family, and it has been the brothers' dynamic that has been the biggest selling feature of the show. In an interview, Kripke recognizes the importance of characterization to the show's success:

I think is probably very rare for a genre show to have--characters as dimensionalized as ours--and I'm really proud of it. It has a lot to do with Bob Singer and the other writers probably more than it had to do with me. I came in just looking for good kills, and through the talents and abilities of the actors and the writers, they just brought these guys to life in a way I never really dreamed, obviously. (Surette)

While the brothers have always had a realistic relationship – they bicker and get on each others' nerves – season six and seven saw their relationship become increasingly strained. Carver also remarks upon the collaborative nature of the writers' room and the importance of character in talking about season eight: “I think it wasn't so much a debate [in the writer's room] as to who was going to take the trials, as it was that we sat down and really looked at the arc of, frankly, Sam's character in particular, this season” (qtd in MacKenzie). Season eight has seen Dean become re-invested in his primary role as protector of his brother – a task given to him in the “Pilot” (1.01) by his father.

There are many similarities within the production crew and even the structure of the storylines between Kripke, Gamble, and Carver, but the end products have varied in their success. Arguably, the entire writers' room contributes to the success or failure of a season, but ultimately, the showrunner has the most input. How, then should one determine what makes a season a success or failure? This question remains unresolved by a definitive answer. One clear way might be the Nielsen ratings. Another might be entirely subjective. Neither way is completely satisfactory, and both of these in combination with audience reactions and apparent satisfaction or dissatisfaction and basic textual analysis may yield the most satisfactory results. In general, the first five seasons of the show garnered the most success when looking at all the factors together. However, Gamble's seasons six and seven aired on Friday night, and Fridays traditionally garner

much lower ratings than almost any other night.²⁶ So, while ratings dipped during six and seven and have rebounded strongly in seasons eight and nine with the show on Wednesday and Tuesday respectively, there are clearly other factors at work here. Kripke has been most successful at constructing a long term arc, and this can be attributed to his having a clear vision of what his story arc is. Season one was about the brothers finding their father. Season two was about killing Azazel (the YED's real name). Season three was about trying and failing to break Dean's deal. Season four was about preventing the Apocalypse by preventing the breaking of the seals. Season five was about stopping the Apocalypse. Within those main arcs, there was also a clear vision and development of the brothers' characters and relationship. While the basic story is easy to articulate, it also provided opportunity for meaty subject matter and standalone episodes.

Gamble's storyarcs are not as easy to articulate. Season six is about stopping Castiel from opening Purgatory, but because it is structured like a film noir, the audience was actually kept in the dark about what was happening until late in the season, though hints were given earlier. The season seemed to be about Sam getting out of Hell and losing his soul and the introduction of the Campbell clan. Season seven was about stopping the Leviathans. The overall mytharc for the season was clearer, but the characters' development seemed to flounder. Dean in particular seemed to have simply sunk into an alcoholic well of despair. Castiel fared even worse in season seven than in season six as the writers seemed to be unable to decide what his characterization should be and as Misha Collins was downgraded to a recurring status. While Kripke centered on family, Gamble seemed determined to simply kill off everyone close to the brothers. Perhaps even more egregiously, Gamble puts the Impala in hiding for almost the entire season. There have been indications that both the cast and production were not happy during Gamble's tenure.²⁷

²⁶ Wikipedia has an entire page devoted to the "Friday night death slot" also known as the graveyard slot. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friday_night_death_slot

²⁷ Bob Singer remarks that no one was happy with season seven, the Leviathan storyline, and that fan reaction was also negative. Sherry Schuderer posted August 29, 2013. Creation's Salute to Supernatural Convention Vancouver. YouTube. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72_gqdFoKao. See 24 minute mark.

In speaking about his own long term storyarc, Carver once more stressed the importance of character: “When I spoke to the multi-season arc, it is like an accordion. There are elements we can stretch and contract as long as we’re always staying true to the brothers’ relationship; everything else is pliant” (Roffman “Teases”). In her review of the season eight DVD-Blu-ray, Lyda Scott comments that

Season 8 of *Supernatural* is, in many ways, a reboot of the series, and reaction has varied. To some, it’s “Season Gr8,” while others have been less enthusiastic. According to ratings, the season’s overall promise overshadowed many problems; however, some narrative disjointedness does exist, and while that can be artfully used to create speculation and suspense, it can also be detrimental.

Carver’s storyarc is in some ways following the same path that Kripke’s did. Kripke and Singer have both stated that they really did not know what the show was about until they got about half way through the first season and realized it was primarily about family – not merely a monster/horror show. This was the element of the story that particularly had fans talking about and responding to the show; this is the element they were passionate about. Recall that Newman posits that all good serials are about character and this moment seems like a clear turning point. Carver’s first season has a similar dividing line. On the season eight DVD commentary for episode season eight’s “As Time Goes By” (8.12), Carver and Singer reveal that they did not realize until the episode aired what a game changer it was and that it would provide an overarching focus going forward. The season is about finding the tablets written by Metatron and locking the gates of Hell. This was clearly laid out in the first episode. The first half of the season, however, deals with the brothers becoming reacquainted after Dean spent a year in Purgatory. The characters of Benny and Amelia are introduced and largely abandoned by episode 12 when the brothers discover a family legacy in the Men of Letters. Sam is chosen to complete the trials necessary to close the gates, and Dean returns to his roots as protective older brother – and general all around bad-ass hunter. The episode “Taxi Driver” (8.19), garnered a great deal of fan backlash due to what fans felt was a complete lack of attention to canon by the writers. Specifically, it was suddenly easy to get into both Purgatory and Hell, yet previously neither Sam nor Dean could rescue the other from

Hell and it took Dean a year to find a way out of Purgatory.²⁸ Carver falters at the pacing in the middle of the season, and this is likely due to *Being Human*, the show he was previously showrunner on, being a 13 episode season, with a necessarily different rhythm.

What do the actual shapes of the seasons look like? Figure 1 indicates the primary content of each episode in seasons one, five, six, and eight: Seasons one, six, and eight were chosen because each of these was a first season for the showrunner. Season five was chosen as an example of a mature storyarc as this was Kripke's last season. Episodes in red are heavily mytharc oriented, blue have significant myth content and black are essentially standalone episodes. Green episodes in season six are the soulless Sam/Campbell storyline and purple combine the Eve storyline with the Castiel/Crowley storyline. Carver's season, like Kripke's is largely red and black with the yellow dividing line. The more blue and red episodes, the more engaging the season as the consistency of plotting maintained viewer engagement and helped comprehension.

²⁸ For a sample of the fan and critic backlash, the following article by Lynn Zubernis and its comments provide some illustration. "Supernatural 8.19: Along For the Ride on Taxi Driver." *Fangasm!* April 5, 2013. <http://fangasmthebook.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/supernatural-8-19-along-for-the-ride-on-taxi-driver/>

Figure 1: Comparison of Season Arcs: Mytharc and Standalone Episodes

Kripke (Season 1)	Kripke (Season 5)	Gamble (Season 6)	Carver (Season 8)
<p>1.01 Pilot</p> <p>1.02 Wendigo</p> <p>1.03 Dead in the Water</p> <p>1.04 Phantom Traveler</p> <p>1.05 Bloody Mary</p> <p>1.06 Skin</p> <p>1.07 Hookman</p> <p>1.08 Bugs</p> <p>1.09 Home</p> <p>1.10 Asylum</p> <p>1.11 Scarecrow</p> <p>1.12 Faith</p> <p>1.13 Route 666</p> <p>1.14 Nightmare</p> <p>1.15 The Benders</p> <p>1.16 Shadow</p> <p>1.17 Hell House</p> <p>1.18 Something Wicked</p> <p>1.19 Provenance</p> <p>1.20 Dead Man's Blood</p> <p>1.21 Salvation</p> <p>1.22 Devil's Trap</p>	<p>5.01 Sympathy for the Devil</p> <p>5.02 Good God, Y'All</p> <p>5.03 Free to Be You and Me</p> <p>5.04 The End</p> <p>5.05 Fallen Idols</p> <p>5.06 I Believe the Children Are Our Future</p> <p>5.07 The Curious Case of Dean Winchester</p> <p>5.08 Changing Channels</p> <p>5.09 The Real Ghostbusters</p> <p>5.10 Abandon All Hope</p> <p>5.11 Sam, Interrupted</p> <p>5.12 Swap Meat</p> <p>5.13 The Song Remains the Same</p> <p>5.14 My Bloody Valentine</p> <p>5.15 Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid</p> <p>5.16 Dark Side of the Moon</p> <p>5.17 99 Problems</p> <p>5.18 Point of No Return</p> <p>5.19 Hammer of the Gods</p> <p>5.20 The Devil You Know</p> <p>5.21 Two Minutes to Midnight</p> <p>5.22 Swan Song</p>	<p>6.01 Exile on Main St</p> <p>6.02 Two and a Half Men</p> <p>6.03 The Third Man</p> <p>6.04 Weekend at Bobby's</p> <p>6.05 Live Free or Twihard</p> <p>6.06 You Can't Handle the Truth</p> <p>6.07 Family Matters</p> <p>6.08 All Dogs Go to Heaven</p> <p>6.09 Clap Your Hands If You Believe</p> <p>6.10 Caged Heat</p> <p>6.11 Appointment at Samarra</p> <p>6.12 Like a Virgin</p> <p>6.13 Unforgiven</p> <p>6.14 Mannequin 3: The Reckoning</p> <p>6.15 The French Mistake</p> <p>6.16 And Then There Were None</p> <p>6.17 My Heart Will Go On</p> <p>6.18 Frontierland</p> <p>6.19 Mommy Dearest</p> <p>6.20 The Man Who Would Be King</p> <p>6.21 Let it Bleed</p> <p>6.22 The Man Who Knew Too Much</p>	<p>8.01 We Need to Talk About Kevin</p> <p>8.02 What's Up Tiger Mommy?</p> <p>8.03 Heartache</p> <p>8.04 Bitten</p> <p>8.05 Blood Brother</p> <p>8.06 Southern Comfort</p> <p>8.07 A Little Slice of Kevin</p> <p>8.08 Hunter Heroic</p> <p>8.09 Citizen Fang</p> <p>8.10 Torn and Frayed</p> <p>8.11 LARP and the Real Girl</p> <p>8.12 As Time Goes By</p> <p>8.13 Everybody Hates Hitler</p> <p>8.14 Trial and Error</p> <p>8.15 Man's Best Friend With Benefits</p> <p>8.16 Remember the Titans</p> <p>8.17 Goodbye Stranger</p> <p>8.18 Freaks and Geeks</p> <p>8.19 Taxi Driver</p> <p>8.20 Pac-Man Fever</p> <p>8.21 The Great Escapist</p> <p>8.22 Clip Show</p> <p>8.23 Sacrifice</p>
			<p>Season Arcs Key</p> <p>Red = Mytharc episode</p> <p>Blue = some myth</p> <p>Black = monster of the week</p> <p>Green = soul-less Sam</p> <p>Purple = Eve storyline</p> <p>Yellow = turning point – introduction of Men of Letters</p>

The basic structure of the individual episodes of the show has been consistent over the run of the series and all three showrunners. Once again recalling the serial's emphasis on character, the first part of the season generally focuses on Dean's story arc while the second half focuses on Sam's. There is a mytharc heavy episode with a cliffhanger just before the winter hiatus in December. A good example of this was in season two. In "Croatoan" (2.09), Dean tells Sam at the end that their father had said something to Dean about Sam just before he died. The audience had to wait until "Hunted" (2.10) to find out what that secret was. Generally the last three episodes of the season tie into the overall story arc, again tying up some loose ends while generally ending on a nail-biting cliffhanger going into the summer hiatus: the car crash in season one, Dean's deal in season two, Dean going to Hell in season three, letting Lucifer out of the pit in season four, Sam going to Hell in season five, Castiel turning into God at the end of season six, Dean going to Purgatory in season seven, and the angels being expelled from Heaven and Sam apparently dying at the end of season eight. Once again, looking at the chart, season five is blue or red in the final ten episodes. Granted, this is not only a season climax but also a climax to Kripke's five year vision. This incredibly dense storytelling and the impossibility of topping the Apocalypse as a climax may contribute to the dissatisfaction with subsequent years. The last 10 episodes of season six are all over the place, and the last 10 of season eight have arguably some of the weakest standalone episodes of the series, even though the last three episodes were a strong finish.

During Kripke's tenure, Gamble wrote the second last episode in seasons one through five and wrote the second episode of seasons three to five, giving her considerable input into how major stories were set up and wrapped up. Interestingly, every episode that Gamble wrote in season one was co-written with Raelle Tucker. In season six, Gamble wrote three episodes. Curiously, she did not write the final episode of the season, Kripke did. Kripke was kept on as an executive producer in season six, and his stepping in to write the final episode is a good indication that the story arc needed to be put back on track. The first and last episodes of a season are arguably the most important in terms of acting as signposts for fans. They should either set up or wrap up the entire season and therefore they generate the most fan reaction. The beginning of a season establishes expectations and the final episode must generate satisfaction and

anticipation for the coming season. From the producers' point of view, this reinforces fan loyalty and hopefully ensures a continuing audience. If enough interest is generated, it should also attract new viewers and expand the audience.

As already stated, in season seven it seems likely that Gamble may have spent too much time on her own writing, instead of delegating and overseeing the work of others. In contrast, Carver has only written the season openers for season eight and nine and the closer in eight. One of the other important duties the showrunner performs is liaising with fans through interviews throughout the season. Often these interviews are done via numerous blogs and trade magazines, but CW shows often produce promotional videos in which the showrunner will introduce an upcoming episode. They often take this opportunity to answer fans' concerns.²⁹ Interestingly, Carver has not done very many and Gamble stopped doing them in season seven, being replaced by Bob Singer.

The types of episodes that they have written are also an important consideration. As already mentioned, Kripke wrote primarily myth heavy episodes, generating interest in the continuing storyline. Gamble's episodes are often character driven such as "Faith" (1.12), "Bloodlust"(2.03), "Heart"(2.17), and "Death's Door"(7.10). Carver, in particular, is adept at mythology building episodes such as "A Very Supernatural Christmas"(3.08), "In the Beginning"(4.03), "The Rapture"(4.20), and "Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid"(5.15). In their study of online fans, Moore and Costello discerned a number of viewer preferences: "The online fans in this study characterized themselves as carefully choosing the few programs to which they were loyal. Series with story arcs over several episodes, challenging themes, and interesting characterization were preferred. Respondents were drawn to what they perceived as intellectually stimulating content" (139). Clearly, it is an important quality that a showrunner has both a good sense of characterization and a good sense of effective long-term plotting, as well as a sensitivity to building and maintaining a healthy fan relationship.

Recalling that a series needs to satisfy both long time fans and casual viewers, redundancies and stand alone episodes encourage casual viewers to tune in as they will

²⁹ Several examples can be found on YouTube, such as this one by Sera Gamble for the season six episode "Mommy Dearest": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA34pSxTpsI>

still be able to follow and enjoy a single episode. *Supernatural* helps the casual viewer by beginning each episode with a previously on montage. The “Then” montage provides useful background for new viewers and a memory aid for regular viewers. In season one, this montage was the story of Mary Winchester’s death and how the main characters ended up “saving people, hunting evil. The family business.” Even the standalone episodes may contain a brief reference to a major story arc or at least touch on a recurring theme, family being the thread that runs most predominantly through all nine seasons, thus also providing coherence. The standalone episodes have the advantage of providing closure at the end, but even questions posed by the season long arcs can be answered at regular intervals giving a sense of closure as the season progresses as well. New questions can be posed as old questions are answered to help propel the story forward.

Newman states that “Arc is to character as plot is to story” (23). This resonates with the way that *Supernatural* has traditionally split the seasons with the first half focus on Dean and the second half on Sam. Traditionally, fans have identified a bias on the part of Kripke for Dean and on the part of Gamble for Sam. In season five, tellingly enough, Gamble wrote the Sam-centered episode “I Know What You Did Last Summer” while Kripke wrote the Dean-centered “Heaven and Hell” and the episodes were really a two part sequence. Fans have long complained that Dean has no storyline while there is never any insight into Sam’s character or feelings. Perhaps, in some ways this allows the main characters to support both arc – through Dean – and plot – through Sam.

According to Newman episodes follow a basic four act structure broken into a series of short segments or beats to keep the viewer interested and engaged and keep the story moving (17-8). There are usually 25-40 beats per episode with a major character plot receiving over 6 beats and a minor plot receiving fewer than 6. *Supernatural* is fairly unique in only having two main characters and fans complained vigorously when Lauren Cohen and Katie Cassidy were added as regulars in season three (Superwiki). Misha Collins was initially hired for 3 episodes in season 4 and kept on for more when there was audience support for the character, and Collins became a regular in season 5. Episodes such as “Bitten” in season eight which saw the main characters in the minor plot or season five’s episode “The End,” which featured very little of Sam, were also not

well received (Superwiki). This means the main characters may figure in more than the usual number of beats.

Many episodes are structured almost like procedurals as the main characters attempt to solve the monster of the week mystery. There is a “Then” montage followed by “Now” which is most often someone being killed by a monster ending in a blood splatter which cuts to the season specific, and often episode specific, title card. The first beat back is a scene with the brothers discovering the mysterious death. The brothers then travel to the location, often visiting the scene of the crime, local law enforcement, the morgue and/or pertinent witnesses. Dean is the braun and Sam the brains, and they often split up to investigate. The second and third acts usually have beats of the brothers investigating and then informing each other – exposition for the audience – about what they have discovered. There may be further beats with victims or monsters. The fourth act is usually the climax of confronting and killing the monster. There is usually a final scene between the brothers that may tie up the case or touch on the mytharc. Gamble ended many of her episodes with the brothers in the Impala or talking across it– or substitute car and this became a framing device for her. Carver seems to have struggled somewhat in maintaining momentum within standalone episodes and tends to overburden mytharc episodes with too many plot points.

The most significant differences between showrunners lie in the structure of the overall arc. Differences on the micro level of episode also reflect the strengths of the longer arcs. Kripke had a vision for a longer arc and Carver has stated that he does as well. Kripke and Carver’s visions of the main characters and their relationship are also more similar to each other than either is similar to Gamble’s vision of the characters and their relationship. Gamble’s vision was a year at a time. It seems that this longer vision, especially in the context of a character driven serial is likely to be more successful. Showrunners may be more accountable to fans because they are on the front lines as it were in fielding audience pushback. Showrunners must also contend with pressures from networks and studios to maintain an audience. However, fans have tended to have more direct contact with the writers themselves than with the showrunners. The writers are not under as much direct pressure from studios, but they certainly have the self-interest to remain popular among the fans and to keep the show popular. How much direct influence

fans have on the actual show itself is best examined through a close reading of the text itself. The next chapter examines humour in the show. The close relationship between fans and producers allows for many different types of humour to be used in the show.

4 Shockingly Funny: *Supernatural* Bridges the Gap Between Horror and Humour

At first consideration, horror and comedy would seem to be antithetical genres. Noel Carroll, however, identifies that “[t]here is some intimate relation of affinity between horror and humor” (146). In fact, the boundary between horror and humor is quite porous. The monsters of horror are often absurd or preposterous, forcing the audience to reconsider what they know about their own reality. Usually, when one thinks of bad horror, one thinks of the monsters that fail to elicit fear, eliciting laughter instead, such as the recent *Sharknado* or the classic *Plan 9 From Outer Space*.³⁰ Yet, how often is the building tension of horror relieved by a funny moment or line? Humour and laughter can act like pressure valves, providing audiences with the much needed relief of laughter from the tension of watching horror, but in this way, humour or the ridiculous can actually heighten the increasing tension of a horror story by prolonging the movement towards the climax. What is the effect when something seemingly humorous turns into horror? Monsters, according to Carroll, “can be alternately horrifying or laughable depending upon whether the narrative context invests them with fearsomeness or not” (157). The audience looks to the characters to see whether the characters are horrified or amused by the monster. When the audience realizes what it thought was humorous is actually horrific, its reaction is likely to be more intense. Horror can be heightened then by the unexpected turn of a character from an object of amusement to an object of fear or horror. That horror may be heightened when both the audience and the characters through whom the audience is experiencing the action are caught by surprise. *Supernatural* also utilizes the way humour can be used as a psychological defense mechanism against horrific events for both the audience and the characters within the show.

There is actually a long history of the marriage of humour and horror in film going back to Abbott and Costello, and Tony Magistrale notes that “this comedic line

³⁰ *Sharknado* is a 2013, Syfy channel, made for tv movie about a tornado that picks sharks up out of the ocean and deposits them in Los Angeles. Reviews on Rotten Tomatoes list it as so bad it’s good. http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/sharknado_2013/; *Planet 9 From Outer Space* is a classic fifties horror movie directed by Ed Wood who was renowned for his low budget science fiction and horror films. In the film, aliens use zombies to stop the human race from creating a doomsday weapon.

represents an important component in the genre's oeuvre" (171). Le Theatre du Grand Guignol in France is renowned for its plays which "strove to terrify and titillate the spectator through a mixture of horror, laughter and the erotic" (Ruff 67). Plays at the Grand Guignol made use of the very human tendency to laugh at another's suffering. A frequent technique was to use familiar, every day settings, playing on the incongruity of the setting and the subject matter. Ruff points out that "Comedy and horror meet at Le Theatre du Grand Guignol as both exploit a fear of the body – of the pain that the body experiences" (72). The staging strategies were designed to provoke very specific reactions from the audiences even as the audiences were relieved to be separated from the action on stage, to have others experience the pain. The plays evoked the common place even while separating the audience from it. Many of these same elements are present in *Supernatural*, as the show utilizes small to mid-size American towns and homes as settings and special effects in lieu of staging strategies. The settings could be the fans' own towns or homes and the special effects make the violence on screen seem palpable. Harvey Roy Green points out that the monsters in horror because of their "freedom from social constraint energize that anarchic, Rabelasian spirit of playfulness which Bakhtin theorized was central to the rituals of Carnival. Freud argued that humour functions as a reverse zoom from harsh reality enabling the mind to master sundry mishaps and misfortunes by facilitating healthy objectivity" (133-4). This resonates with Baudrillard's theory that resistance happens at the site of irony and culture jamming and that in the hyper-real the viewer becomes part of the spectacle. Fans are freed from their comfortable homes by the juxtaposition of the supernatural. Both humour and horror represent a break from the strict laws of reality, but according to Carroll, "Horror, in some sense, oppresses; comedy liberates. Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it" (147).

Humour plays a surprisingly prominent role in *Supernatural*, which is generally considered to be a horror or dark fantasy show. Not only are jokes, popular culture references, meta-textual in-jokes, and physical humour present in almost every episode, entire episodes are considered "humorous," but the funny episodes are like dark mirrors to the serious episodes, often beginning light-heartedly only to spin out and become dark and horrific by their end. Humour is often used to lighten the tension for both the

audience and the characters. The characters are often in physical peril which may result in injury, death or a pratfall. Martin points out that “Humor also enables us to avoid becoming too emotionally involved in the distress and problems of others”(49). Fans are invited to create a protective distance through humour, and this technique is also taken up by the characters in the show, particularly Dean. This practice is very reminiscent of what Fairclough refers to as “rhetorical deployment: people may learn new discourses and use them for certain purposes... while at the same time keeping a distance from them” (“Cultural Discourse Analysis” 7). Horror as a genre makes use of humour, but humour also relies on that close relationship with the fans for the fans to understand and appreciate the humour. There needs to be a shared language between fans and producers. Fan engagement then facilitates the use of humour in the show.

Dean dies almost one hundred times in a the episode “Mystery Spot” (3.11), each death more gruesomely funny than the last, until suddenly he stays dead, and the focus is on the devastating effect his death has on Sam. The focus shifts from the audience’s laughter to the dark psychological trauma experienced by Sam. All of Dean’s deaths are caused by the Trickster to both amuse himself (and the audience) and teach Sam a lesson. Carroll points out that “Within the comic frame, though injury, pain, and death are often elements in a joke, we are not meant to dwell upon them, especially in terms of their moral or human weight or consequences”(157-8). However, in “Mystery Spot,” the fans are asked to go from Dean’s absurd deaths by eating a bad taco, slipping in the shower, being attacked by a Golden Retriever, to consider how his “real” death affects his brother and turns Sam into a seemingly heartless automaton-like hunter. It is no accident that many of the humorous episodes revolve around the Trickster, a figure well-known in folklore for teaching lessons with a humorous sting in their tail.

Even single jokes can also involve subversion, anxiety and aggression. These jokes often turn on incongruity, focusing on a fish out of water. Castiel, the angel, is often a source for this type of humour. Often when Dean uses a popular culture reference to make an analogy, Castiel simply does not understand the reference, leaving him looking puzzled and Dean looking exasperated, as in the episode “The Song Remains the Same” (5.13). In that episode, Dean compares Anna the angel to Glenn Close’s portrayal of a

crazy, rabbit-killing lover in *Fatal Attraction*.³¹ Someone has to be the butt of jokes or the straight-man, after all, and that role often falls to Castiel. The audience is expected to enjoy the suffering of others, primarily from the relief that the suffering is not their own. *Supernatural* manages to critique itself, society, and popular culture through humour. Humour by its very nature can be horrific or turn on the horrific, particularly when one is simply happy the horror is not happening to him/her, but humorous references can also have a different effect on the audience. Carroll points out that “on Hobbes’s view, the source of comic laughter, indeed of all laughter, is rooted in feelings of superiority” (153). The one-liners and popular culture references in *Supernatural*, as well as the “insider” jokes that only fans of the show will understand, result in feelings of superiority in the audience members who understand the references.

Supernatural utilizes many different types of humour, including the use of one-liners and sight gags; recurring humorous characters, such as the Ghostfacers and the Trickster; the use of parody in connection with themselves, their fans, and the industry; and finally the episodes which are more humorous than horrific. When the episode “Hell House” (1.17) aired in the first season, the show’s seemingly complete shift in tone from horror to humour might have broken the fourth wall (see chapter 6), the invisible wall between the audience and the show to make it impossible for audience members to then return in the next episode to a world that was horrific, to take the horror seriously. “Hell House” also began the story of the Ghostfacers, Ed Zedmore and Harry Spengler, who provide a comedic foil for the brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester. Ed and Harry also appear in the episodes “Ghostfacers” (3.13) and “It’s a Terrible Life” (4.17)³² and became popular enough to be spun off into their own Web-series. Producers capitalized on fans’ engagement with the characters to be strong enough to follow the characters’

³¹ The IMDb page for the Paramount production gives the following synopsis: “A married man’s one night stand comes back to haunt him when that lover begins to stalk him and his family.” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093010/>

³² The title of the episode plays on the title to the Jimmy Stewart movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Producers count on fans having at least a passing familiarity of the story of a man pushed to his limit and considering suicide because his problems seem insurmountable. In the end, he realizes his life is wonderful and embraces it. Dean is also at a low point in his life, so Zachariah transports him to another reality where Dean recommits to his life of saving people, hunting things, which is at heart a terrible life, but he embraces it anyway.

story to another media platform. Interestingly, the episode “Ghostfacers” is more horrific in the end than it is comedic, particularly when Corbett, a member of the Ghostfacers team is killed. There is a particularly poignant moment between Ed and Corbett’s ghost that is far more likely to illicit tears of sadness in fans than laughter. Fans are required to move quickly between humour and horror, further unsettling them and causing greater anxiety because of the juxtaposition of these two reactions/emotions. Because the Ghostfacers had appeared in more than one episode, the fan’s familiarity and acceptance of them helped fans to feel horror and empathy when the tone became serious.

Humour, like horror, often depends on a personal association with an object, person, or action. It may rely on the audience understanding that oblique reference. In an informal poll on *Live Journal*, fans were asked what their favourite humorous moments or episodes were because humor can be very subjective. The episodes that were mentioned included “Hell House” from the first season, “Tall Tales” (2.15) and “Hollywood Babylon” (2.18) from the second season; “Bad Day at Black Rock” (3.03), “Mystery Spot” (3.11), “Jus in Bello” (3.12), and “Ghostfacers” (3.13) from season three; “Monster Movie” (4.05), “Yellow Fever” (4.06), “Wishful Thinking” (4.08), and “It’s a Terrible Life” (4.17) from season four; “Changing Channels” (5.08) in season five; and “Clap Your Hands if You Believe” (6.09) and “The French Mistake” (6.15) from season six. This long list represents only a selection of the episodes that could be classified as humorous. “Changing Channels,” “Tall Tales,” and “Yellow Fever” were particularly singled out as was one particular quote from “Jus in Bello.”

“Jus in Bello” is actually a very serious episode in which the Winchester brothers are trapped in a jail by a virtual army of demons, with a few law enforcement officers after the brothers are apprehended by Agent Hendrickson of the FBI. Hendrickson thought they were dangerous and insane criminals until he himself is possessed by a demon in the episode. While possessed, he shoots and kills the sheriff. After the demon is exorcised from him, Hendrickson is horrified to learn that he killed the sheriff. Dean struggles visibly, realizing that this is a very serious moment – between the death of the officer and Hendrickson finally realizing the truth about both the supernatural and the brothers, but Dean cannot help himself and blurts out “But you didn’t shoot the deputy.” He smirks as Sam gives him a dirty look for the inappropriate remark, but the tension of

the scene is broken along with the final remnants of tension between Hendrickson and the Winchesters. This lighter moment also provides a break in the tension for the audience. Carroll states that “The basic idea behind the incongruity theory of humor is that an essential ingredient of comic amusement is the juxtaposition of incongruous or contrasting objects, events, categories, propositions, maxims, properties, and so on”(153). Furthermore, Carroll points out that “this apparent incongruity is a matter of the transgression of standing concepts, categories, norms, and commonplace expectations”(154). Martin comments on the psychological impulse behind such remarks: “By poking fun at the ineptness and stupidity of oppressors, gallows humor can be a subversive activity that allows one to gain a sense of freedom from their power, a refusal to be completely subjugated by them, despite their apparent domination”(49). In this scene, Dean is the transgressor, and Sam, who rolls his eyes, represents social codes of propriety. The scene plays upon the fan engagement with music in the series and fans knowledge of the brothers.

Dean’s one-liners are both a part of the show and a part of his character as established right from the “Pilot.” In fact, many of the humorous elements that are an integral part of the show are present in the “Pilot.” Lines such as “Driver picks the music and shotgun shuts his cakehole,” “No chick-flick moments,” and Dean calling Sam “Bitch” and Sam responding with “Jerk” are as much a part of the soundtrack of *Supernatural* as the classic rock found in Dean’s collection of “mullet rock.”³³ Dean, as has been pointed out, often uses gallows humor to defuse tense or emotional scenes. In much the same way, when the brothers manage to kill the woman in white who has been killing unfaithful men in the “Pilot,” and Sam is almost killed in the process, their exchange is typical: Sam asks Dean, “What were you thinking shooting Casper in the face?” and they end up laughing as the tension of the moment is released. Martin identifies this as a common psychological coping mechanism: “forms of humor with a grotesque or macabre character (“black humor”) [are] used as a means of maintaining one’s sanity in seemingly hopeless or extremely harrowing situations”(49). The

³³ Variouslly described as “classic rock bands of the 70s and 80s.” See “Supernatural Glossary.” *Supernatural fan wiki*. n.d. <http://www.supernatural-fan-wiki.com/page/Supernatural+Glossary>

Winchester brothers often find themselves in such situations, and the fans do too as they experience the same situations vicariously. Humour often turns on a shared reference such as “Casper” – a reference to the children’s cartoon of the same name. Producers rely on fans sharing that knowledge base with them.

Humour is also used effectively to draw the audience more completely into the story through the use of popular culture references and “in-jokes”. In the “Pilot,” Dean refers to the FBI agents who arrive to investigate the crime scene as Mulder and Scully – a direct reference to *The X-Files*. While this is a fairly obvious popular culture reference – and to another horror series – it is also an in-joke as many of those involved in the production of *Supernatural* were also involved with *The X-Files*, including Eric Kripke. In fact, in the “Pilot” episode, the brothers find newspaper articles on the wall of their father’s motel room³⁴, and in one article, a Deanna Kripke is cited. This is a recurring device in *Supernatural* – to use the names of those who work on the show in the show. Casual viewers would still find the Mulder and Scully reference funny, but fans find humour in the added layer of knowledge that allows them to connect the comment to the producers. Singer’s salvage yard – and the character Bobby Singer – was named for executive producer and director Robert Singer. In fact, the character’s name was supposed to be Bobby Manners – after both Robert Singer and Kim Manners (also an *X-Files* alum), but the name Bobby Manners did not pass the process of legal clearances.³⁵ The connection to executive producer and director Bob Singer is brought fully home for comedic effect in the sixth season’s “The French Mistake” (6.15). In this episode, Dean and Sam are sent into an alternate universe by the angel Balthazar. In that universe, they are not recognized as the Winchester brothers, but everyone else sees them as Jensen Ackles and Jared Padelecki who play Dean and Sam on the television show *Supernatural*. In one scene, while sitting in the set for Bobby’s house, Bob Singer tries to reason with his actors, whom he thinks have spun out of control. He says he feels he’s become like an

³⁴ This is a recurring “hunter’s technique” to spread the evidence collected out on a wall to determine patterns and discern clues.

³⁵ Whenever a name is used in television or film, the legal department must ensure that there is no one by that name living in the location that the show is using for where that character lives in the show. See Bierderman et al.

uncle to them – hilariously mirroring their relationship with the character Bobby Singer. Dean asks him point blank: “What kind of a douche names a character after himself?” Once again, humour is created by a feeling of superiority in the viewers who understand all of the nuanced layers that are included in this episode.

The episode also features footage of Ackles from his role as Eric Brady on *Days of Our Lives* – with horrified reactions from both Dean and Sam. The incongruity of this scene leads to horror on the characters’ parts, but fans enjoy the in-joke. While soap operas are usually marginalized, as are genre movies and horror shows, Ackles has always had nothing but praise for the actors on soap operas (Superwiki). In most instances, the audience will take its cue on how to react to a situation from how the characters react. In *Supernatural*, however, the relationship with fans is nuanced enough for fans to react with laughter. The author of the *Supernatural* novels – who turns out to be a Prophet of the Lord – uses the pseudonym Carver Edlund, which is a mash-up of series writers Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund. Both the names and pictures of other members of the *Supernatural* crew can be found on missing posters and parade banners in various episodes. Producers can rely on fans’ engagement with the production of the show to ensure that fans recognize the names and pictures of those cast and crew members who are referenced.

Dean takes great delight in coming up with popular culture aliases, such as Ford and Hamill, or more frequently names from classic rock, like Bachman and Turner or Page and Plant, for whatever law enforcement or other agency the brothers are posing as to garner information. *Star Wars*, in which Harrison Ford played Han Solo and Mark Hamill played Luke Skywalker is frequently referenced in the show. Dean and Sam are fans of the movie themselves. In addition, fans will be aware that Kripke often refers to Dean as the Han Solo to Sam’s Luke Skywalker (Superwiki). Classic rock aliases such as Bachman and Turner or Page and Plant are a further indication of the importance of the music to the show and the expectation that fans will share that passion and thus get the joke. Fans are meant to be in on the joke and laugh at those characters on the show who do not “get” it. Occasionally, however, a character will recognize the alias which causes the brothers to squirm, but can also be a source of tension and danger should their deception be discovered. For example, the police do not believe Dean is actually Ted

Nugent when they arrest him in the “Pilot” (1.01) for impersonating a Federal Marshall. The police are obviously not amused when they ask him if anything about him is real, and once again Dean deflects them with humour by answering, that his boobs are real. Once again, the character acts in a very psychologically consistent way, by using humor to deflect the seriousness of the situation. These brief moments of humor also provide relief from the tension building in the episode, allowing the audience to relax momentarily.

Castiel, or Cas, the angel who is introduced at the beginning of season four, is a good foil for that portion of the audience who may not pick up on Dean’s oblique cultural references. The angel’s struggles to understand human feelings, values, and cultural mores often lead to humorous moments, including Cas’s obliviousness to personal space and his inability to get drunk until he drinks an entire liquor store (“99 Problems” 5.17). In the episode “Hunteri Heroici” (8.08) from season eight, Dean once again admonishes Cas for invading his personal space by watching Dean sleep. In another context, this behavior could be seen as more than simply “creepy” as Dean labels it. However, the audience acknowledges that Dean is not threatened by this action and Cas’s behavior is generally perceived as endearing or amusing, fulfilling the role of straight man. The light-hearted moments in seasons four and five serve to provide a contrast to Cas’s slow fall from grace, losing his powers as he slowly slides toward becoming human and the show slides towards the Apocalypse. It is unfortunate that by season seven, the character of Castiel has become more of a caricature of what he was. In the earlier seasons, his foibles were endearing and helped the audience to relate more to the character. The humorous moments helped to make his incredible power as an angel less threatening. As he becomes more human, however, the audience is faced with that incongruity in his character, between the power he has as an angel and his ridiculousness in a human world and context, and his fall becomes more horrific as a result. In season eight, the character has once again somewhat regained some of his “other worldly” demeanor and power. His character is drawn less as an object of derision, making him a more effective character generally. Initially, Castiel was only supposed to be in three or four episodes, but fans reacted so positively to him and the producers enjoyed the character so much that his role was expanded, and Misha Collins was made a regular character for seasons five and six.

He was downgraded to recurring in seasons seven and eight. Fans lobbied to have his role expanded again, however, and Collins is once again a regular in season nine (Superwiki). This is an example of fans having a direct influence on the show.

“Bad Day at Black Rock” (3.03) is one of the most ridiculous episodes that still manages to have horrific elements. Anyone who touches the cursed rabbit’s foot in the episode has amazingly good luck until he or she inevitably loses the rabbit’s foot and then their luck turns very bad. One victim ends up slipping on a beer bottle and being impaled on a cooking fork: both horrific and ridiculous. His pain becomes a moment of gallows humor for the audience. In addition to losing his shoe, Sam ends up setting himself on fire, but in both instances, there is no physical harm done, thus removing the threat and the horror and leaving humour in its wake. The episode “Wishful Thinking” (4.08) has a very similar premise. In this episode, people who make a wish in a fountain receive their wishes but the wishes quickly turn bad. Dean’s Italian submarine sandwich ends up giving him food poisoning, for example. This episode also contains a gigantic, angst ridden teddy bear – the little girl who made the wish just wanted a companion for tea parties – and she ends up with a teddy bear who attempts suicide. Unfortunately, blowing his stuffing out of the back of his head with a shotgun does not end the world for the teddy bear. The ridiculous things that happen to the victims in this episode actually bring home the moral that one should be careful what one wishes for. Sam has wanted to know what happened to Dean who had gone to hell to save Sam’s life in the previous season. Dean has been refusing to admit he even remembers Hell, but he finally reveals to Sam at the end of this episode that he does remember, but it is so horrific that there is no way that he could ever make Sam understand what it was like and he is not going to try. The humour in the episode provides the incongruity that makes Dean’s final speech even more horrific.

The sixth season’s episode “Clap Your Hands if You Believe” (6.09) is another example of what seems like a straightforward comedic episode that nonetheless provides a darker subtext. This episode also has a number of in-jokes and popular culture references – most notably to *The X-Files*, for which it is an homage, and *Pinocchio*. The Winchester brothers appear to have finally stumbled upon an alien abduction – aliens having been the one thing to remain firmly in the does not exist category. The episode

even features a mock credit sequence that mirrors the credit sequence of *The X-Files*. Instead of ending with the classic “The Truth is Out There” tag of *The X-Files*, however, the *Supernatural* credits for the episode end with a shot of the Impala and “The Truth is IN There”. Once again, producers rely on fans’ knowledge of other franchises, particularly those associated with producers of *Supernatural*, to understand the in-references and find the humour. The seeming leader of the Alien “hunters” is played by the same actor who played the Doctor on the science fiction show *Star Trek Voyager*, another nice in-joke. In the end, he turns out to be an evil Leprechaun. As this episode opens, the brothers are dealing with Sam having come back from Hell without his soul – which means he has neither empathy nor sympathy – he is, in fact, a dark mirror of himself. Interestingly, he is still able to find things funny. Dean tells him that he will have to act as Sam’s conscience – to which Sam says, “So you’re saying you’ll be my Jiminy Cricket?” To which Dean replies, “Shut up. But yeah, you freakin’ puppet, that’s exactly what I’m saying.” The incongruity once again causes laughter over a much more serious issue. Dean himself is abducted while talking on the phone to Sam. Dean yells, “UFO! Close Encounter!” and Sam asks, “What kind? First? Second?” Dean shouts, “They’re after me!” Sam: “Third kind already? You better run man. I think the fourth kind is a butt thing.” Dean shouts back, “Empathy, Sam! Empathy!” just before the line goes dead. During this exchange, Sam is silently ordering another beer, and when he loses his connection to his brother he leans back to drink it while eyeing his waitress lasciviously. This mix of humour, horror, and the erotic is very evocative of *The Grand Guignol*. Sam truly has lost the connection to his brother and social norms. Later on, another hilarious exchange takes place when Dean is attacked by a fairy and kills her by microwaving her. Sam asks Dean what happened. Dean, embarrassed says, “It was a little naked lady.” Sam asks for clarification. Dean further explains: “It was a little... glowing... hot ... naked lady with nipples and she hit me.” Sam struggling not to laugh, asks, “I’m not supposed to laugh, right?” This self-consciousness about the appropriateness of reactions should resonate with fans in their own reactions to things like blood spatters, which often elicit nervous laughter.

The episode also has a classic sight gag when the brothers visit the resident fairy expert for information and the brothers are given tiny cups to drink tea. The episode turns

to darker themes, however, at the end when the brothers are fighting for their lives. The leprechaun offers to return Sam's soul. Still alluding to Pinocchio, Sam asks: "You're my blue fairy? You can make me a real boy again?" to which the Leprechaun answers: "When you wish upon a star."³⁶ At the end of the episode, Dean asks Sam if he was not tempted to take the Leprechaun up on his offer, but Sam maintains that he was not because their deals with supernatural characters never turn out well for them. Sam's comment is both a reference back to Dean making a deal to bring Sam back from the dead at the end of season two and foreshadows Dean's deal with Death to restore Sam's soul later in the season. The threat to the brothers was, in fact, very real, creating a sense of horror even in this very funny episode. Producers also count on fan engagement to make the appropriate connections to previous episodes and story arcs.

This theme of the brothers learning a lesson is one of the driving forces behind their interaction with the Trickster. Three of the four episodes that the Trickster appears in contain a high percentage of humour. Many of the humorous episodes, like "Tall Tales" (2.15) follow particularly dark or myth-heavy episodes. "Tall Tales" follows "Born Under a Bad Sign" (2.14) in which Sam is possessed by a demon and the brothers' relationship is strained. The Trickster pits Sam and Dean against each other and they have to call Bobby in to help with the case. Bobby realizes they are dealing with a Trickster and explains to Dean and Sam: "These things create chaos and mischief.... Tricksters target the high and mighty – knock them down a peg, usually with a sense of humor. Deadly pranks, things like that." In this instance, the Trickster takes his ideas from *The Weekly World News* – having an animal researcher eaten by an alligator in the sewer and the local 'jock' abducted by aliens – who probe him and force him to slow dance. When they eventually come face to face with the Trickster, he offers Dean two beautiful women to let him go because "Those people got what they had coming. Hoisted on their own petards." While some of the justice the Trickster hands out only results in humiliation, he has also killed people, making him a dangerous threat. When Dean says

³⁶ The reference here is to the Disney movie, but fairy tales have deep roots, going back to Perrault and Grimm, for example which are much more horrific by modern sensibilities. These older versions tend to be much bloodier and violent than the sanitized Disney versions. The episode "Bedtime Stories" (3.05) also uses fairy tales for comic effect.

they cannot let him go, the women beat him up and the monster from the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* shows up and tries to kill Sam. Dean manages to “kill” the Trickster, but when they leave, the audience sees the illusion of the Trickster disappear and the real Trickster still alive. This final scene re-ignites the horror, or the danger, for the fan even while the characters remain ignorant of the potential continuing danger. The episode provides some relief from a number of more serious episodes, but it also picks up on the season two theme which focuses on that gray area between good and evil: the Trickster appears to be punishing only those who deserve it, but he is killing humans and the Winchester brothers are driven to protect humans.

The Trickster reappears in “Mystery Spot” (3.11). Sam becomes stuck in a horrific version of *Groundhog Day*³⁷ in which the day ends over a hundred times with Dean’s death – in increasingly ridiculous ways. When they seem to have finally broken the cycle, Dean dies apparently in earnest. The episode then depicts the deterioration of Sam into a killing machine in the aftermath. This episode takes place during season three after Dean has sold his soul to bring Sam back from the dead and only has a year to live before his soul is claimed by hell. The Trickster’s lesson is that Sam needs to let his brother go. He tells Sam, “This obsession to save Dean? The way you keep sacrificing yourselves for each other? Nothing good comes out of it. Just blood and pain.... Sometimes you just gotta let people go.” Sam continues to beg for his brother’s life, and finally the Trickster says, “This stopped being fun months ago: You’re Travis Bickell in a skirt.” And Sam wakes up to find his brother brushing his teeth. Producers need to have an accurate idea of who their audience is when using popular culture references like this one to the main character in *Taxi Driver*³⁸. For their own part, fans are enthusiastic trivia spotters as evidenced by trivia challenges on Twitter between producers and fans and the large number of entries on trivia on Superwiki.

The Trickster returns in season five in the episode “Changing Channels” (5.08). This episode is also an example of *Supernatural*’s deft use of parody. The use of parody

³⁷ 1993 comedy/drama movie starring Bill Murray as a news weather forecaster stuck living the same day over and over again.

³⁸ 1976 drama starring Robert DeNiro as a Vietnam war veteran who becomes increasingly unstable and violent as the movie progresses.

requires that fans understand the genre tropes that the parody is exaggerating to comic effect, and *Supernatural*'s producers can rely on fans understanding the discourse used in the show. Magistrale points out that horror is an excellent medium for parody, but "it is first necessary to appreciate a genre in order to possess skill enough to satirize it" (172). In this episode, the Trickster's message is that the brothers need to play the roles that destiny has given them. The brothers have unleashed the apocalypse and Sam is destined to be Lucifer's vessel while Dean is destined to be Michael's. The angels cannot possess them, however, unless the brothers say yes, accept their roles. The Trickster then forces them to play roles on a spoof of *Grey's Anatomy*, complete with a hilarious shout out to the character Denny who was played by Jeffrey Dean Morgan, who also played the brothers' father on *Supernatural*. He also places them in a Japanese game show – *Nutcracker* – , a commercial for a genital herpes remedy, a sitcom, and *Knight Rider* – with Sam as the Impala/Kitt. Perhaps most hilarious is their spoof of David Caruso on *CSI Miami*. This episode goes from hilarious to dark horror in a snap of the Trickster's fingers. The brothers have deduced that the Trickster isn't actually who he's been pretending to be – he's actually the archangel Gabriel and his interest in the Winchesters is complicated and mirrored by his relationship with his own family, with his own brothers Michael and Lucifer. The sudden shift in the tone of the episode heightens the audience's response to this pivotal revelation.

Supernatural parodies the television industry in general in "Changing Channels" (5.08) and their own show specifically in "The French Mistake" (6.15). The second season episode, "Hollywood Babylon" (2.18) parodied the film industry with references to *Supernatural*. The producers rely on their fans having knowledge about the physical process of production as well as specific knowledge of the show's production. Dean finds he actually likes being a PA (production assistant) despite the fact that they are basically "slaves," and, being Dean, he especially likes all the free food to be found on set. Dean's love affair with food is a continuing source of humour throughout the series. It is another example of a lighter touchstone that viewers can use to relieve the tension of the storyline. At one point in "Hollywood Babylon," the producer of the movie asks the director if the movie could be less "dark". The network repeatedly asked that

Supernatural be shot “lighter” – the network seemingly not understanding a basic premise of the horror genre.

Supernatural and its own fandom are parodied in both “The Monster at the End of the Book” (4.18) and “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09). Dean and Sam have to prove themselves fans in order to get information on the author who is apparently publishing the story of their lives in a series of novels in “The Monster at the End of the Book”. Dean and Sam go online to find out more about the novels and stumble upon fandom. They discover postings by a Simpatico (rumoured to be a real fan user name who was banned from the CW boards) and are horrified to learn about Wincest.³⁹ In “The Real Ghostbusters”, Dean and Sam attend a fan convention. They find themselves in a room filled with fans almost all in full Winchester costume. In this episode, the brothers are helped by two fans dressed as Sam and Dean – and who will only help them if Sam and Dean play Bobby and Rufus, two of the older hunters in the series. Damien and Barnes are the subjects of Dean’s ridicule, but they earn his respect by actually endangering themselves to save the brothers. They move from comic effect to a vital part of the more serious storyline. Dean learns at the end of the episode that the pair, whose real names are Damien and Barnes, are actually life partners – another shout out to Wincest – and they help Dean to see that the brothers’ lives do matter. In this instance, the producers actually get to ‘ship’ the fans in a ‘slash’ pairing.⁴⁰

“Monster Movie” (4.05), from season four, parodies the classic horror films that are the very seeds of the series. The brothers are hunting a shapeshifter, who takes the form of the Mummy, the Wolfman, and Dracula. One of the major clues the brothers find is labels to a prop house on the evidence they collect. The episode plays on the tropes of horror for humour but also as an homage. The episode was shot in black and white, even mimicking famous shots from the classic films and taking place during Oktoberfest to mimic the historic European setting of the original Dracula. The lightheartedness of this episode keys into the continuing storyline by reflecting Dean’s *joi de vivre* after returning

³⁹ Wincest refers to the fan fiction devoted to the idea that the brothers are in a sexual/romantic relation rather than just a filial one. This variation on a portmanteau breaks down to Winchester + incest = wincest.

⁴⁰ Slash pairings in fan fiction and fan works refers to characters of the same sex who are placed in a sexual relationship.

from hell but the monster's climactic speech also reflects Sam's concern with being a monster and the running theme of what makes a being truly monstrous. Carroll explains that "many monsters, like werewolves, are categorically interstitial, straddling the categories of wolf and man as a result of being composite creatures. Other monsters, like Dracula and mummies, are categorically contradictory, they are both living and dead at the same time" (152). The shapeshifter is likewise neither one thing or another, and in many ways, Sam and Dean are also outsiders, contradictory in being protectors of and outcasts from society. This episode also relies on fan engagement to understand that an "old time" monster hunt connects the brothers to their roots as hunters, an important progression as Dean re-acclimatizes after Hell.

Much of the humour in *Supernatural* comes from playing with the fans' expectations about the brothers so seeing them having no clue about hunting ghosts in the episode "It's a Terrible Life" (4.17) leads to a number of humorous moments, such as Dean, who loves his Baby the Impala, driving a Prius. The brothers' characteristics may be turned on their head or exaggerated, such as Sam's over the top empathy in "Tall Tales" (2.15) and Dean's succumbing to supernatural illness in "Yellow Fever" (4.06), which results in a loss of his courage: his being frightened of the standard horror movie trope of the hidden cat jumping out of a locker is only one instance. The horror in this episode builds because as funny as the symptoms may be, if they do not cure him Dean's heart will explode within 48 hours. True to *Supernatural's* general pattern, the humour truly turns to horror as Dean's last hallucination is of Lilith and that hallucination awakens Dean's memories of Hell.

Sam's fear of clowns⁴¹ is also a source of humour for both the audience and Dean. However, in the season two episode, "Everybody Loves a Clown" (2.02), the monster is a Rakshasa that takes the form of an evil clown that convinces children to let it into their homes so the monster can then kill their parents. Carroll explains that the "anthropological literature on ritual clowns identifies clowns as categorically transgressive beings" (155). Clowns slip easily from humor to horror. Carroll points out

⁴¹ Ironically, in real life, Ackles is afraid of clowns, or at least "creeped out" by them, and Padalecki is not. Supernatural Convention Los Angeles 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XoXSJyQV4dE>

that a monster “can be alternatively horrifying or laughable depending upon whether the narrative context invests them with fearsomeness or not” (157). This is particularly true in the season seven episode “Plucky Pennywhistle’s Magical Menagerie” (7.14). In this episode, the brothers investigate bizarre murders at a restaurant for children. It turns out that Howard, a human with a grudge, is using children’s nightmares to kill their parents. When Howard turns his hoodoo against Sam, he uses Sam’s fear, and Sam is attacked by murderous clowns. At the end of the episode, Dean apologizes to Sam for making him afraid of clowns by leaving Sam alone in similar restaurants when Sam was just a child. Sam as a child then invested clowns with horror and thus Howard was able to do the same to an adult Sam. This serious moment is also infused with humour as Sam is covered in glitter from his attack by the clowns.

Supernatural’s use of humour is pervasive throughout the series. It serves to both heighten and relieve tensions both within individual episodes and within the season arc as a light episode follows a particularly dark one. Gallows humor, one-liners or sight gags may be used within an otherwise serious and horrific episode. *Supernatural* also follows in a horror tradition of using parody to critique its own genre – as a horror film, a television series, and the object of fan attention. The use of humor does not take away from the overall themes of the show, and in fact is used so deftly as to highlight and deepen the fan’s knowledge of those themes, serving to further those storylines. Carroll points out that “with horror fictions, ideally, the emotional responses of the audience to the monster are meant to mimic the emotional responses of the human characters in the fiction to the monsters therein” (149). *Supernatural*’s unique relationship with its fans allows the fans to recognize humour where the characters might express horror, but it also allows the fans to follow the characters’ leads in knowing when to laugh and when to scream. Fairclough states that “[t]exts... are the semiotic elements of social events, and it helps... if we think of them in process terms as ‘texturing’: social agents draw upon social structures (including languages) and practices (including orders of discourse) in producing texts, but actively work these ‘resources’, create (potentially novel) texts out of them, rather than simply instantiating them” (“Cultural Discourse Analysis” 5). In completing the communication circuit, the greater fan engagement allows producers to experiment with different forms and push the boundaries of traditional tropes. The next

chapter examines how the portrayal of women in *Supernatural* is affected by the producer fan relationship and how that element of the text may be textured.

5 From Monstrous Mommies to Hunting Heroines: The Evolution of Women on *Supernatural*.

Women on the television series *Supernatural* have had a hard go of it. Initially, women were cast in maternal or victim roles or as monsters. Creed points out that “[a]s with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity”(3). As the show developed, however, there was an attempt to create stronger, recurring roles for women. Fan resistance spelled the doom of many female characters initially, especially those cast primarily as love-interests for the male main characters, Sam and Dean Winchester. In fact, even the possibility of a woman’s becoming a love interest could spark immediate and rabid fan hatred. Interestingly, the one female character who was universally loved, Mary Winchester, the main characters’ mother, evolved from a seemingly passive victim to a kick-ass hunter in her own right over the course of five seasons as her hitherto unknown past came to light. Arguably the acceptance of Mary’s past helped to pave the way for more strong female characters such as Sheriff Jody Mills and Charlie Bradley. Spigel points out that “audiences ‘decode’ media according to their own social backgrounds and identities” (“Introduction” 9). The women in *Supernatural* are constructed from both without, by the fandom, and within, by the television and horror stereotypes. The fandom influenced the show to such an extent that the show actually incorporated a female fan, Becky, into the *Supernatural* universe. Rosinsky notes the split in feminist criticism, particularly in speculative fiction, of whether the female identity is constructed from within or from outside of the individual. Judith Butler asserts that “[t]he view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts” (xv). *Supernatural*’s construction of women moves from a highly patriarchal and ‘traditional’ view of women to a more nuanced and complex construction in part both because of and despite of its largely female fanbase.

A recent amateur survey on Tumblr indicated that 93 percent of the *Supernatural* fans surveyed were women, while 4 percent were male and 4 percent self-identified as other. The same survey indicated that 87 percent of those responding were under the age of 24 (Non Timebo Mala on Tumblr <http://destiels-impala.tumblr.com/results>). Recent

ratings news for the most current, complete season, indicates that *Supernatural* had the largest gains in the 18-49 demographic of any show on network television, indicating that the age data of the survey done on Tumblr may be inaccurate at least as far as overall viewership is concerned. The important point here is that whether or not the demographic information is accurate for all viewers, it does point to the gender of fans who are actively engaging with each other on the Internet and who are subsequently the fans most likely to have an influence on the production as “active” fans. Another place that “active” fans can meet each other and interact with the stars of the show and even at times those involved in production is fan conventions. While male attendance at *Supernatural* conventions appears to be on the rise, the vast majority of those in attendance are female.⁴² The age demographic skews higher than that found on Tumblr, but that could be attributable to the cost of attending conventions. Online fans are engaged on many levels with the show, and because they are already engaged on a more active level than casual viewers, these are the fans most likely to have an increased interaction with the show’s producers. Showrunners Eric Kripke and Sera Gamble, as discussed in chapter 3, have been candid about admitting to reading online forums and taking an informal gauge of the audience reception of the show through those interactions.

The premise of this thesis that the way viewers interact with television has changed remarkably in the last decade is evident in the recently completed 5 year study by Zubernis and Larsen on *Supernatural* fandom and identity. They concluded that the “relationship between fans and the creative side, as well as the human representations of the fannish objects themselves, are increasingly reciprocal” (14). Zubernis and Larsen’s study focused on the relationship itself and not how that relationship affects the production of the television show itself. Victor Costello and Barbara Moore in their 2007 study also observe that fandoms have a new found power with the advent of the Internet to connect with one another: “Where pre-internet fandom was largely decentralized and limited in mass, inhibiting the collective bargaining power of individuals and geographically dispersed fan consortiums, online fan communities have the potential to

⁴² This conclusion is based on the author’s own attendance at and observation of roughly 20 conventions between 2009 and 2013.

produce unified centers of resistance to influence the global industries of cultural production”(140). Fans are beginning to understand their own power in the greater scheme of the industry. Catherine Johnson examines the rise of cult television as a way for marginal networks to gain loyal audiences and compete with the larger networks’ higher ratings. She sees this strategy as having changed since the inception of cult television in the 1960s:

cult television and fan audiences are no longer understood by the industry as marginal, atypical, or simply irrelevant. As the example of *Lost* demonstrates, the networks appeal to the ‘fan’ in all viewers, encouraging fan activity and loyalty as a part of television spectatorship in an era when multi-media participation is increasingly becoming the norm. (Johnson 144)

Fans have a greater influence and producers and writers have a greater awareness of them than ever before. Jeremy Butler points out that the growing interest in media production studies places more emphasis on how the industry encodes the text with meaning. Furthermore, Butler points out that one of the major aspects “of the current global economy to interest political economists is the rise of digital technologies and networking and their impact upon media economics” (409-10). *Supernatural* is on the CW, the fifth US network.⁴³ As such, it does not have the pressure to have the same ratings as a show on say NBC or ABC, but it does still have to bring in enough revenue to finance the production and justify remaining on the air. As a “cult” show, with a small, but fiercely loyal fan base, *Supernatural* is able to derive a significant portion of its revenue through foreign distribution, dvd/blu-ray sales, and merchandise. All of these are good reasons to remain sensitive to audience reaction and reception of characters.

Supernatural has been on the air for over eight seasons now, and even in that time, attitudes towards women have arguably changed, but it is important to take a brief look at how far women’s roles on television have changed – or not changed. Television has moved from the Mrs Cleavers to the Kate Becketts. Jeffrey Brown points out that “our depiction of women in the media is so grounded in eroticism and objectification it is difficult to conceive of them in different terms” (13). Brown points to the action heroine

⁴³ See also chapter 2.

as having the potential to “function as progressive role models” (14). *Supernatural* would seem to have a natural, cultural space for the action heroine in the guise of female hunters, yet there has been great resistance to the introduction of female hunters on the show. Mothers and mother figures tend to be the most well-received and this is likely an aspect of identification on the part of the 18-49 year old largely female demographic. Science fiction and fantasy tend to offer better roles for women – ostensibly because they are most often set in the future, the past, or an alternate reality, such as Captain Janeaway on *Star Trek Voyager*, Xena on *Xena, Warrior Princess*, or Buffy on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. These shows featured women in lead roles. *Supernatural* only featured two women as regular cast members and both only in season three. Stuller was inspired by Xena and Buffy to look for modern day superwomen role models in the tradition of Wonder Woman. She devised a four part criteria for these characters: narrative that draws on mythology, an element of the fantastic, a uniquely identifiable skill or power, and a mission that benefits the greater good (5-7). Interestingly, while one would not immediately think of many of the female characters on *Supernatural* as *superwomen*, many of them do fit these criteria. Mary Winchester is but one example.

How women are portrayed on *Supernatural* is a product of a number of influences. In some ways it grows out of the patriarchal vision generally embodied on television. It is also important to realize that the writers’ room itself on *Supernatural* is the product of a largely patriarchal system. In addition, that writers’ room has been almost entirely populated by men. At most there have been three women writers on any given season, even when Sera Gamble was the showrunner. I would, however, contest the accusations of outright misogyny on the part of the writers. The discussion of misogyny among the writers has been an on-going one. Most recently, Misha Collins, who plays Castiel on the show, said at a fan convention that he is disturbed by the level of misogyny displayed by the show (Superwiki). Collins is known for making outrageous and often tongue-in-cheek remarks at conventions, and this comment arguably falls into that category. The high death toll of women can be more realistically explained by turning to horror conventions and tropes in general. Horror as a genre is more steeped in a rigid and stereotypical rut when it comes to the portrayal of women than perhaps any other genre.

Kawin provides a useful gloss of horror: “As a genre, the horror film is defined by its recurring elements (such as undeath, witches, or gross, bloody violence), by its attitudes toward those elements (such as that transgressing limits is dangerous) and by its goal: to frighten and revolt the audience” (4). Creed identifies some of the major female stereotypes found in horror: “archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, possessed monster, *femme castratrice*, witch, castrating mother” (151). Short criticizes the assumption of Creed and other critics “that the genre’s main audience is male and utilise psychoanalytic principles to argue that its representation of women either reiterates male fears surrounding sexual difference, or anxiety about female power in general” (2). Short identifies ambiguities in the stereotypes identified by Creed and others and sees these as “recoverable spaces, providing textual openings by which to reinterpret meanings and debate possibilities” (172). Other highly recognizable tropes for women in horror include the virgin (often for sacrifice), the tramp/seductress (interestingly, also often for sacrifice), medium or seer, the screamer, and the damsel in distress. How then, do the women of *Supernatural* fit into these various categories and tropes? How do they compare to others on television and in horror, and what kind of response has the audience had, and what was the response of the writers to that reception, especially in the case of recurring characters?

The mother is a particularly strong trope in *Supernatural* and drives a great deal of the plot. The entire entry of the Winchester brothers and their father into the world of “hunting things, saving people” is initiated by the death of Mary Winchester, the mother of Dean and Sam and the wife of John. The series begins with her death in the “Pilot” and for much of the first season, the episodes begin with a flashback to her death. Mary begins as the quintessential sacrifice, right down to the white nightie that is her only costume until the end of season two. In the first season, she is destroyed by fire not once but twice in the course of trying to save her youngest son. Her real purpose is as victim, generating the revenge motive for both her husband and her sons.

The “Pilot” (1.01) contains two virginal sacrifices which bookend the episode. Immediately after the scene of Mary’s death, the first person the viewer meets in the present is Jessica Moore, also dressed in white, but as a naughty nurse for Halloween. The mother figure is juxtaposed with the femme fatale or stereotypical sexy blond of

horror movies. The link to Mary is completed by the camera panning to a shot on the mantel of Mary and John. The audience quickly learns that Jessica is the most important woman in Sam Winchester's life that she has been his only support and girlfriend while he has been at Stanford. We next see her being protected from a supposedly dangerous intruder by Sam later that night who turns out to be his brother. In this scene, her status as innocent (though still seductress) is emphasized by her wearing a Smurf t-shirt. The episode ends with a bookend of the opening scene when Jessica is sacrificed by fire in a white nightie just as Mary was. Jessica's death becomes the impetus for Sam rejoining the hunting life. Because his mother died when he was still a baby, her death had not affected him in the same way it had Dean and John, but Jessica's death generated the anger necessary to set Sam on the same road of vengeance as his father. Jessica's character is never given the opportunity to develop the way Mary's is in the show. Neither Jessica nor Mary have ever represented a point of contention between the fans and producers. Most often fan rejection of a female character is due to that character coming between the brothers. In some ways, the fans themselves mother the characters on the show and are very protective of them.

Mary is able to become a recurring character because of the supernatural element of the show. In an alternate reality in "What Is and What Should Never Be" (2.20), Dean experiences a world in which Mary is alive. Dean's life is very much shaped by the loss of his mother. In the season one episode "Dead in the Water"(1.03), Dean tells Lucas that he tries to be brave because that's what his mother would have wanted. Sam learns, along with the viewer, that for some time after his mother died, Dean did not speak. In the "Pilot" (1.01) and in flashback in "A Very Supernatural Christmas" (3.08), Dean becomes angry when Sam does not afford their mother's memory sufficient respect. Creed explains that the "archaic mother is the parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end" (17). Mothers and their absence is a central theme for the show. Dean is protective of Mary in "What Is and What Should Never Be" (2.20), which also features a return of Jessica in this alternative reality. Both brothers are in successful and happy relationships but their relationship with each other is strained. There is a recurring theme in the series that anything that comes between the brothers is suspect and likely evil. This almost perfect world has been created in Dean's

mind by the Djinn who is slowly draining the life out of him. Dean's perfect world includes his mother, a fiancé for Sam, and a girlfriend who is both beautiful and understanding. Dean's perfect world is horrific to the fan who wants nothing to come between the brothers or between the fan and her fantasy. Mary is the one person in this fantasy world that brings the brothers together. In "Dark Side of the Moon" (5.16), in a scene from his past, Dean is protective of Mary even as a child and comforts her when she and John are briefly separated. Yet, in this same episode, Mary is used against Dean by Zachariah the angel as he uses her image to taunt Dean, and she becomes the castrating mother.

Mothers are frequently seen as victims in the show. In the first season alone, single mothers or women in mothering roles need help or rescuing in 9 of the 22 episodes. Women are central victims in 19 of those 22 episodes. The season three episode "The Kids Are Alright" (3.02) centres on mothers whose children are being taken by changelings. Central to the episode is an old love interest of Dean's, Lisa Braedon. Dean actually wonders whether her son Ben could be his child. She tells him no, but there is continuing speculation that she may have lied about it. A demon taunts Dean that Ben is his son in the Braedons' last appearance on the show in season six's episode, "Let It Bleed" (6.21). Interestingly, both the episode that created Lisa and the last one she appears in were written by Sera Gamble, and in season six, Gambles first season as showrunner, Lisa Braedon emerges as a recurring character and as a love interest for Dean. Ultimately, her storyline comes to a close because of an on-going resistance on the part of fans to either of the brothers having a love interest. This fan resistance may be due in part to the similar resistance among many fans to what is viewed as a "Mary-Sue," a female character used in fan fiction to place the author inside her own fiction: in this case Gamble. While fans are protective of the characters, in fiction, fans have little interest in casting themselves in the mother role: "Mary-Sues" are almost always love interests for the brothers. How fans view the show itself may also be linked to how they view it in fan fiction. *Supernatural* is the second most popular show on fanfiction.net, second only to *Glee* in the number of stories posted about it. While this thesis is not about fan fiction, it is still important to note the influence that medium has over fans and their reception of

storylines. Fans who style themselves as writers are more likely to feel they should have a say over the writing of the show and the shape of the storyline.

Any relationship that comes between the brothers has met with fan resistance. In season eight, even Dean's friendship with Benny was a source of contention among fans. Regardless of the cause, this fan push back began in the hiatus between seasons one and two, when it was discovered that a recurring character in season two would be Jo Harvelle. Jo was touted as a kickass hunter in her own right and a love interest for Dean. Over the hiatus, fan reaction to this possibility was extremely heated and negative. Superwiki reports that Jo was initially named Alex and was "heavily rejected by fans" when the character first appeared on the show's IMDb page in June 2006 ("Fandom Chronicle: 2006"). In July, new sides for the character were leaked and the character had been completely re-written, ostensibly in response to the fan reaction. In contrast, Ellen Harvelle, Jo's mother, and a mother figure for the brothers, was extremely well received. By the end of the season, Jo had disappeared, but Ellen makes a final appearance to help in the final showdown in "All Hell Breaks Loose Part 2" (2.22). However, in that final showdown, she does become a victim who needs to be saved. Ultimately, in season five's "Abandon All Hope" (5.10), Jo and Ellen are given heroes' deaths in the course of saving the brothers. Looking once more to fan fiction, one of the most popular types of stories on fanfiction.net is hurt/comfort. Who better to provide succour for the characters than a mother figure? While fans may fantasize about being the woman in the characters' lives, many of them are in the age demographic to be mothers and therefore can identify with that role. Mothers are acceptable female characters but female characters are not acceptable when they pose any kind of a challenge to the male characters prowess or the relationship between the two brothers.

Mary's characterization as passive victim is revisited in season one in the episode "Home"(1.09), when she saves her sons, but even more significantly in season four's "In the Beginning" (4.03), when Dean travels back in time and learns that his mother and her family were, in fact, hunters. Even Mary's mother, Deanna, after whom Dean is named, is an effective hunter, even displaying those skills in the kitchen while cutting up fruit salad. Young Mary is seen again in season five's "The Song Remains the Same" (5.13). In this trip back in time, she once again plays a strong, competent character who is able to

contribute to the safety of the group on an equal level with her sons, and in fact, more effectively than John, their father, who was not a hunter until after his wife's death. Fan reaction to learning about Mary's past was mixed but primarily positive. The revelation of her past also caused a reassessment of her actions in the "Pilot" (1.01). With a hunter's knowledge, and knowing that she had made a deal with Azazel, the Yellow-Eyed Demon in "In the Beginning" (4.03), did she know what she was getting into when she stepped into that nursery? Was she, in fact, attempting to save her family instead of simply being a passive sacrifice? These are questions that have never been definitively answered.

Creed argues that the "central characteristic of the archaic mother is her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle. She is the mother who conceives all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation. She is outside of morality and the law" (27). The archaic mother is one of the monstrous-feminine archetypes that Creed describes along with the monstrous womb. Neither of these descriptors particularly capture Mary, but they do describe Eve, the mother of all monsters who appears in season six, in "Like a Virgin" (6.12). Eve appears from out of a fiery abyss in a white nightdress in a mirrored, negative image of Mary and Jessica's deaths. When Eve wants to try to persuade Dean and Sam, she assumes the guise of Mary, their own mother, in the episode "Mommy Dearest" (6.19). In another odd twist on the mother/child dynamic, it is Dean who names her newest offspring "Jefferson Starships." Ultimately, Dean is the one to kill her.

Because *Supernatural* is a horror show at its heart, and because the central characters have dedicated their lives to killing monsters, they necessarily do kill rather a lot of women in gruesome ways. However, the show is not completely simplistic in its depiction of female monsters or female horror tropes either. Vampires are depicted as both male and female. In "Dead Man's Blood" (1.20), Kate and Luther are the two vampire leaders. Luther is killed, but while Kate is held captive and tortured, she ultimately escapes. In "Bloodlust" (2.03), it is the male hunter Gordon who turns out to be the monster, not the female vampire Lenore who has trained herself to live on animal blood and is the leader of her nest, directing the male vampires. Similarly, werewolves in the show are seen as both male and female. In season two's "Heart" (2.17), Madison is clearly a victim when she is bitten. Sam falls in love with her and ultimately she asks him

to kill her to prevent her from hurting anyone else. In point of fact, in contrast to the usual vagina dentata of horror, Sam has the penis of death as almost every woman he sleeps with ends up dead. Amelia from season eight and Dr Roberts from season four's "Sex and Violence" (4.14), are notable exceptions. Even though Madison is a victim and a monster, she is still given the dignity of determining her own fate. In season eight's "Bitten" (8.04), the case once more revolves around werewolves. In this case, Kate is bitten by Brian and ultimately kills him. She tells Dean and Sam via video that she promises never to hurt anyone ever again, and they decide to let her live unless she becomes violent.

Possession is another way that women can become monstrous. Creed explains that "Possession becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behavior which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject – and perversely appealing" (31). Creed goes on to describe the monstrous female as being beautiful on the outside to hide a truly evil nature inside, reinforcing that notion from Judith Butler about the performativity of the feminine, being a woman requires that the woman adopt a role. Two prominent demons recur on the show, and both appear in multiple, but always beautiful guises. Meg first appears in season one's "Scarecrow" (1.11) and her last appearance is in season eight's "Goodbye Stranger" (8.17). Meg moves from purely evil to an ally of the brothers and a potential love interest for Castiel. In season two's episode "Born Under a Bad Sign" (2.14), Meg possesses Sam. While possessed, Sam displays no overtly feminine traits nor is he weakened in any way. Meg is discovered simply because both Dean and Bobby know Sam well enough to sense that he is not himself. At the end of the episode, Dean does tease Sam: "Dude. You like full on had a girl inside you for like a whole week. That's pretty naughty." Dean characteristically makes a sexual joke about it, but the reality is that it takes the combined efforts of Dean and Bobby to defeat Meg and get her out of Sam. It would be easy for Meg as a stereotypical horror figure to have had a static arc, but she is seen to evolve over the course of the series. She learns from her defeats and disappointments to die by redeeming herself and saving the Winchesters, or at least allowing them to escape from Crowley. It is a testament to the strength of the character that it takes the King of Hell himself to ultimately defeat and kill her.

Interestingly, Meg was always a favorite among fans, once again because she did not pose a threat as a romantic interest.

Positive reception can be linked to the characters not posing a threat to the brothers as a romantic interest or as being “better” than the brothers unless, like Meg, she is a villain. Villains, of course, must be worthy of the brothers and therefore pose a challenge. In addition, villains bring the brothers closer as they must work together to defeat the common enemy. Jo’s fate was sealed the minute she disarmed Dean in her first scene. Both Bela Talbot and the demon Ruby were introduced as regulars in season three. Once again, as before season two, there was a massive fan outcry. Michael Ausiello of *TVGuide.com*, interviewed Kripke after Ausiello “fans ... inundated [him] with hundreds of angry e-mails.” According to Ausiello, fans were concerned that “In a bid to broaden the serial thriller's appeal, CW brass [were] forcing producers to bimbofy the show, hence the two new lady killers.” In that interview, Kripke makes the following, very revealing statement:

First of all, I love our fans. I love them to death. I love how passionate they are. But they tend to worry unnecessarily. They tend to get stressed before they have a chance to judge the finished product. We are so conscious and aware of our fans. We're making the show for the fans; we're not making the show for the network. We would never do anything to betray them. I'm not saying we're perfect. I'm not saying we don't make mistakes. But we're very conscious and aware. And when we *do* make mistakes, we course-correct.

Kripke definitively states that the writers’ room and the production were influenced by fan feedback. In this instance, it would appear to be to the detriment of the portrayal of women. Both Bela and Ruby begin the season as strong, independent women. Bela was an independent business woman who bought and sold supernatural artifacts to the highest bidder. She was projected to be a potential love interest for Dean, as Ruby was destined for Sam. In an interesting twist early in the season, Bela is the one to objectify Dean in “Red Sky at Morning” (3.06) and tells him they should have “angry sex.” Her fate was sealed with the audience when she outsmarted the brothers on several occasions. Later in the season, when it became clear the audience was not accepting her, Sam is the one to have a sex dream about her in “Dream a Little Dream” (3.10). This returns the male gaze back to objectifying the woman. Ruby, unlike the other recurring demon, Meg, was universally disliked. The character was downgraded to recurring and recast for season

four but did become a romantic interest for Sam. She meets her end violently, literally between the two brothers as Sam holds her and Dean stabs her. Interestingly, Kripke wrote and directed “Lucifer Rising”(4.22) and would have both written and blocked the scene. Ruby’s death can be seen as a way of appeasing fans who had been in an uproar over the character coming between the brothers. Bela was, no doubt, a victim of fan backlash, but Ruby appears to have been the character Kripke was asking fans not to worry about in the interview with Ausiello. Ruby was destined to play a significant role within the overall mytharc of seasons three and four.

Two other popular characters who also fill a traditional horror stereotype are Pamela Barnes and Missouri Mosley who are both seers/psychics. Karin Beeler points out that “Women of vision in television and film articulate a resistance to patriarchal attitudes, but also suggest the need to subvert the polarization of men and women and the polarization of science or reason with the inner world of visionary, mystical experience” (1). In addition, Beeler states that “Historically and in myth, women have often been linked to ‘the home’ (Campbell, *The Power of Myth* 153) environment and to inner strength or intuition (e.g., women’s intuition)” (3). Missouri actually appears in the episode “Home” (1.09). Initially, the character was supposed to fill the role that Bobby Singer filled in the season one finale, but they could not get the actress who had gone on to book bigger and better (that is more lucrative) things. Singer, of course, went on to fill a surrogate father role, so it is likely that Missouri would have filled a surrogate mother role. She facilitates the connection between the boys and their mother in the episode, further underscoring her maternal role. They visit Pamela at her home initially in the season four episode “Lazarus Rising” (4.01), and she is the one to tie them to their bodies— another form of home - in “Death Takes a Holiday”(4.15). Pamela’s literal vision is taken from her when she looks upon the true form of Castiel the angel, yet she is still able to use her heightened senses to “see,” and this even extends to being able to sense her environment to physically battle a demon, though she loses the fight and is killed.

Season five saw the introduction of Sheriff Jody Mills – another mother and initially a victim in “Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid” (5.15). However, she manages to help save her town, Bobby, and Dean. Mills would go on to become a romantic interest for Bobby, which was strongly supported by the fandom. She also develops into a support

system of sorts for the brothers, providing help on a few cases, most notably in season seven's "Time After Time" (7.12). In this episode, she acts as a support system, bringing Sam Bobby's research material and helping him go through it to rescue Dean from the past. She also acts as a mother figure, even admonishing Sam to go to bed or she will use her Mom-voice. Mills had the role of mother taken away from her when her child is killed (twice) in "Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid" (5.15). Pairing her with Bobby makes her place as surrogate mother very clear, even though there was some fan speculation about Jody and Sam having a romantic possibility when they share a bottle of Scotch in "Time After Time" (7.12). Rhodes dispelled this possibility at subsequent fan conventions. Conventions are one way that fans can get clarity on storylines and plot developments. The information garnered at these conventions is generally shared widely through YouTube videos and fans blogging about their experiences. Rhodes' popularity at fan conventions is likely a contributing factor to the character appearing again in the last episode of season eight, "Sacrifice" (8.23). That episode continued the storyline begun in "Clip Show" (8.22) that saw Crowley threatening to kill everyone the brothers had ever saved.

"Clip Show" (8.22) saw the return of Sarah Blake from season one's episode "Provenance" (1.19). Blake represents the one love interest introduced for the brothers (in this case Sam) who the fans were willing to embrace and yet the writers killed her. Blake had been characterized as a strong character, able to accept what the brothers do and even help them with the case in season one. For most of season one, Sam is seen mourning the loss of Jessica. Fans embraced Sarah because she represented Sam's ability to love again and demonstrated that he had started to move out of the grieving process. Fan attachment would have been somewhat weaker in season one and therefore more willing to accept the introduction of a love interest. In season eight, however, Sarah has moved on with her life and is primarily depicted as the typical female victim. She represents the normal life that Sam has always yearned for and which he tried to have again with Amelia at the beginning of season eight. Sarah's death symbolizes the death of that dream. In addition, the writers brought back a character that would be sure to garner the most sympathy from fans, heightening the horror element by playing on the writers' knowledge of fans.

Perhaps the strongest character introduced to date is Charlie Bradbury. She has extraordinary computer skills, which make her a valuable ally for the brothers and the target of season seven's major antagonist, Dick Roman, the leviathan, in "The Girl With the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo" (7.20). She helps them win, but is injured and needs to be rescued in the end. She is next seen in "LARP and the Real Girl" (8.11), in which she is Live Action Role Playing, but she is not the victim; she is the Queen of Moondor and gets to be the one to save the damsel in distress. In "Pac-Man Fever" (8.20), she has learned all about the hunting life and is clearly like a little sister to the brothers – Dean refers to her as the "little sister he never wanted." In the episode, she gets to appear as a Lara Croft type and is instrumental in solving the case. Even though she is captured by the Djinn and cast in the victim role so is Dean. She demonstrates that her researching skills rival those of Sam. Fan reception for Charlie has been very strong, in part because she is played by Felicia Day, but to a large extent because the character is self-identified as gay. She poses no threat of a love interest nature to the viewers. Charlie is also seen to be a fan herself as she amply displays by her participation in fan practices. Charlie's pop culture references, much like Dean's, clearly identify her as "one of us," and this facilitates her acceptance.

Charlie begins as a victim but quickly becomes an ally before evolving into a hunter in her own right. The show has featured other female hunters, but the majority of them appear for only one episode. Most are seen to be capable like Reisa in "The End" (5.04), Tamara in "The Magnificent Seven" (3.01), or Olivia Lowry in "Are You There God? It's Me, Dean Winchester" (4.02). Most of them are single. Olivia and Annie Hawkins in "Of Grave Importance" (7.19) are both living an existence similar to the loner/outsider existence of the male hunters. Some like Tamara or Gwen Campbell ("Exile on Main Street" (6.01), "Two and a Half Men" (6.02), "Family Matters" (6.07), and "...And Then There Were None" (6.16)) are part of a family unit. In the end, most of them meet similar fates to the male hunters on the show who also appear as victims in need of saving. One example is Lee Chambers in "Adventures in Babysitting" (7.11). Interestingly, this episode also introduces his daughter Krissy who is being raised in much the same way as Dean and Sam were. Dean is determined to save her from the hunting life even though she proves herself to be a competent hunter and is even

instrumental in helping to save Sam and Dean in addition to her father. In her second appearance on the show, after her father has been killed, in “Freaks and Geeks” (8.18), it becomes clear that Krissy will very likely continue in the hunting life.

One of the most significant female characters to emerge in the series is Becky Rosen. Becky Rosen is a fangirl of the *Supernatural* novels in the series which the prophet Chuck has written. She is a direct result of the writers’ perception of fans. In her first appearance in “Sympathy for the Devil” (5.01), written by Kripke, she is contacted by Chuck (Kripke’s stand in in the show) to help the brothers. She is seen writing wincest and cannot stop touching Sam when she does meet the brothers. She expresses disappointment in Dean and is clearly identified as a “Sam-girl.” Initial fan reaction was resistant as she was seen as a monster who exposed fan practice and who lusted after Sam. However, her second appearance in “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09) is more sympathetic. She also transfers her love interest to Chuck in that episode. Her final appearance in “Season Seven: Time for a Wedding” (7.08), however, forever tagged her as a stalker willing to go to any lengths to secure the object of her desire. Once again, fans were confused and unhappy with this portrayal. As Gamble who was showrunner at the time was under fire for two lack lustre seasons, this shift in Becky’s portrayal could be seen as a way of speaking back to the fans. Sam essentially tells Becky to “get a life” much as William Shatner famously told fans of *Star Trek*. Shatner came to regret that remark as he came to understand the passion fans had for *Star Trek* and also the level of understanding they brought to their consideration of the show (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 10). Perhaps this final portrayal of Becky might be an indication that Gamble had come to regret the level of input that fans had achieved: there may be no clearer indication of the influence fans have had on the storyline than the fans themselves being incorporated into the story itself.

Supernatural’s portrayal of women is hampered by being a horror genre show. Its cult status and active fanbase allows for a greater interaction between fans and producers in coding characters, however. Through the seasons of the show portrayals of women have become stronger and more positive. The subject of female characters is an active site of discourse between fans and producers. While the close relationship and on-going dialogue between fans and producers has led to greater creativity in the use of humour

on the show, in many ways this dialogue has hampered producers' creativity with respect to the portrayal of women. *Supernatural's* ability to break the fourth wall is facilitated by the ongoing fan discourse and is, in fact, an extension of that very dialogue. The next chapter examines what may be the site that enjoys the most creativity based on this unique relationship: the fourth wall.

6 I See What You Did There: *Supernatural* and the Fourth Wall

The way viewers interact with television has changed remarkably in the last decade. Julie D'Acci points out “the impact of new technologies, especially the Internet” on television and posits the need to incorporate new ways of thinking about television that are “dedicated to analyzing the interworkings of industries, programming, and everyday life” (421). In particular, she advocates “a revised circuit model as a matrix for defining the field’s object of inquiry and a guide for methodological study” (424). D’Acci defines hegemony as “the process by which various discourses in a social formation come to achieve positions of relative power in negotiations and struggles with other discourses”(434). Specifically, D’Acci’s model focuses on the relationship between cultural artifact, production, reception, and socio-historical context. Traditionally, production is perceived as controlling all the power over a television series, but with the advent of the Internet, greater than ever fan engagement has increased the power that fans can exert upon the cultural artifact. This chapter will explore how the dynamics between production and fans have allowed the traditional barriers between them to be broken down. Breaking the fourth wall is a way for production to speak to fans about their shared relationship and is also an acknowledgement by production of the expertise fans have about the show and production.

Ben Edlund, executive producer and writer of the season six episode of *Supernatural* “The French Mistake” (6.15) calls that episode “as meta as meta gets”. In this episode, Dean and Sam Winchester end up in an alternate universe where people think they are the actors Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki on the television show *Supernatural*. Sera Gamble and Ben Edlund’s comments on the commentary track for the episode on the season six blu-ray,⁴⁴ explain how they are able to breach that wall that traditionally stands between an audience and the cultural artifact. Gamble says:

⁴⁴ Commentary tracks are found on the blu-ray season collections. Full citations for blu-rays are included in the Works Cited and Consulted. All quotations in this paragraph are from the blu-ray commentary.

We often, throughout the episode, say, well, we're on season six, whatever, moving on, but when you are a show on season six, you have a fanbase that is loyal, and you're glad that they're loyal and you're thankful that they're loyal and the least that we can do is do an episode that acknowledges that they know more than the average viewer about the show so we were able to do this because they know what we're talking about and that's a cool thing. And we wrote it hoping that somebody who's a slightly more casual viewer would still at least be able to understand what these people were about on the set. I mean, you know that that's the director, even if you don't happen to know [the in-joke]. But you're rewarded for your diligence as a fan.

Edlund remarks that he “didn't feel like... I was making a gift for the fans. It was more like we were taking part in this weird relationship that we have with the fans. It was like we could depend on the fans to sort of understand because this is a very specific situation: this *Supernatural*, the show, the audience, and how this functions.” In fact, Edlund goes on to distinguish *Supernatural* fans from the fans of other shows he has been involved with: “*Supernatural* fandom is a really phenomenologically [sic] amazing thing. I've been in other situations, viewed other versions of fandom and ... [this is] amazing.” There is no question that *Supernatural* fans share a unique relationship with the production of the show, but it is also in the best interest of the show economically to cultivate this relationship.

Leslie Moonves, President and Chief Executive Officer of CBS, in an interview stressed that the network, which also includes the CW, the network on which *Supernatural* airs, is prioritizing ways in which audience members are encouraged to engage with programming on multiple levels and platforms. He acknowledged that audiences now consume entertainment in very different ways. What lies at the heart of Moonves' interest is of necessity the desire to attract and maintain as large an audience as possible – to have that audience engaged enough to generate the financial support any program will need to remain viable. Moonves also stressed that the traditional way of assessing television success through Nielsen ratings is no longer a viable option. Shows such as *Gossip Girl* which typically attract a demographic between the ages of 18 to 40 will never be served by Nielsen ratings which measure real-time television viewing because this demographic is more likely to watch television via the Internet or their DVRs. Mark Andrejevic points out that “the mass audience is becoming increasingly visible thanks to a variety of increasingly sophisticated monitoring technologies”(25).

The more engaged and invested in a series the audience is, the more likely it is to also buy ancillary products like comic books, season companions, novels, and, of course, DVDs and Blu-rays. These ancillary items go a long way to making up for any loss of income that losing an advertising supported viewership might cause. Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen concluded a more than five year study of the *Supernatural* fandom and identify that the

relationship between fans and the creative side, as well as the human representations of the fannish objects themselves, are increasingly reciprocal. As media texts are more widely disseminated and the fans' constructions become more visible, the division between the creative side and audience is changing. With face-to-face interaction at conventions, the hierarchical boundaries separating fans and fannish objects begin to break down. Even more strikingly, the advent of Twitter, Facebook, and instant feedback ensures that the relationship between fans and creators is no longer unidirectional.(14)

Gamble states that the thing that is “unique about the show *Supernatural* is the quality of the fanbase. We have always been in a pretty direct dialogue with our fans **through** the show” (emphasis added). The dialogue is not just about the show through other communication channels; the dialogue between producer and fan takes place within the show itself. In order for that conversation to be effective, there needs to be a shared language. Victor Costello and Barbara Moore in their 2007 study also observe that fandoms have a new found power with the advent of the Internet to connect with one another: “Where pre-internet fandom was largely decentralized and limited in mass, inhibiting the collective bargaining power of individuals and geographically dispersed fan consortiums, online fan communities have the potential to produce unified centers of resistance to influence the global industries of cultural production”(140). Zubernis and Larsen point out that other showrunners, such as Joss Whedon (*Buffy*, *Angel*, *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*), J.J. Abrams (*Lost*, *Fringe*), and Russell T. Davies (*Dr Who*, *Torchwood*) are known for their interactions with their fanbases (143-4). Whedon and Abrams have had largely positive interactions, however, while Davies and *Glee* creator Ryan Murphy have had less positive interactions. Davies and Murphy have both publicly resisted fan pressure to have input on the fates of their characters: Davies over the death of Ianto Jones in *Torchwood* and Murphy over the fate of the graduating class in *Glee*. Ianto is still dead despite fan campaigns to have him resurrected, and students have graduated

from McKinley High, though some of them have remained on the show. As Whedon has directed an episode of *Glee*, perhaps he could give Murphy some tips on interacting with fans more productively. Costello and Moore recognize a shift in fan engagement: “the notion that some fans can be outlaws in the sense that they do not use the programming offered to them as intended. They are not satisfied with their assigned role: merely to watch the series and its commercials. They want more information”(140), and they want to use that information. Fans have also mounted campaigns to save shows from cancellation. Interestingly, these campaigns have traditionally been conducted through more traditional channels – like the regular postal service. The series *Chuck* was saved for several seasons after a campaign that saw fans buy Subway submarine sandwiches, thus also supporting the main advertiser of the show, using the existing power structures of the industry, and fans also donated to the American Heart Association for NBC, asking the network to have a heart and save the series. *Jericho* was saved for at least a few more episodes after the studio received peanuts through the mail. Both were references to incidents or comments within the shows. The fans utilized the language and symbolism of the show in their dialogue with the producers (Ross 213; Abbott). Fans of many television shows showed solidarity with the writers during the writers’ strike by mailing thousands of pencils to the networks (Ross), demonstrating a knowledge of and interest in the production aspects of the show, not just the show itself. Of course, fan interest here was also self-interest: the writers needed to get back to work so there could be more episodes of the fans’ favorite shows.

Given its devoted and enthusiastic fanbase, it is not surprising that *Supernatural* has bridged the relatively small space separating its audience and characters. Of perhaps equal importance is a production team that is interested in reaching out to that fanbase and the resulting dialogue is most noticeable in the show’s fourth wall breaking. *Supernatural* has broken the fourth wall – that imaginary wall separating the audience from the characters – on many occasions and for a variety of purposes. In “The French Mistake”(6.15), the brothers are sent to an alternate reality by Balthazar to protect them from Raphael. In this alternate reality, there are no supernatural entities and no hunters. In that reality, they are actors Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki and they play Dean and Sam Winchester on a show called *Supernatural*. On the trivia track for the season six

Blu-ray, a pop-up window explains: “Looking at the camera is called ‘breaking the fourth wall.’ Actors shouldn’t do it, unless directed to.” This pop-up is in response to Dean, who is pretending to be Jensen Ackles acting as Dean, telling Sam, who is pretending to be Jared Padalecki acting as Sam, “Look anywhere but at the camera”, while they are pretending to act on the show *Supernatural*. The result is hysterical with Sam’s eyes roving wildly from ceiling to floor and around the room – anywhere but at the camera. While it has been observed that this metafictional technique is often used for comedic effect, *Supernatural* has used it for many reasons over its seven year run. The technique of having a character speak directly to the audience is one way the fourth wall can be breached and it stretches back to Shakespeare and beyond to Greek theatre. *Supernatural* has only employed this technique three times: once in “The Man Who Would Be King”(6.20), once in “Changing Channels”(5.08), and once in “Slash Fiction”(7.06). However, *Supernatural* has broken the fourth wall to comment on itself and the entertainment industry on many occasions. Perhaps most significantly, *Supernatural* has drawn its audience and fans through the fourth wall to be a part of the story itself. The fans have actually managed to insert themselves into the very artifact as the producers examine the relationship between artifact and fan.

William F. French and Janet Worthington examine breaking the fourth wall in murder-mystery theatre-events, but their comments could easily be about many of *Supernatural*’s episodes: “Especially at play is a rare sense of community in which cast and audience unite in a meaningful game that creates a socially-significant drama: actors and audience-players work together as a team to create a thing of beauty and to preserve social values” (111). This interplay between audience and producers is also the dynamic at work in the communication circuits of Hall and D’Acci. *Supernatural* actually has a fictional version of the murder-mystery weekend or fan convention in the episode “The Real Ghostbusters” in which fans attend a convention for the novels in the show that are based on the characters in the show. Some of *Supernatural*’s most successful episodes that break the fourth wall are those in which the writers parody or critique themselves. There are few episodes of *Supernatural*, in fact, that do not contain at least a wink to the attentive fan. One example of this is when Dean says he did not see any rubber ducks in the home of a one night stand in the season seven episode “Slice Girls.” In the context of

the episode, it is a clue that the one night stand did not have any children, but this was a shout out to a fan campaign to send rubber ducks to the set that took place in the summer and fall of 2011 (Superwiki). Some of those ducks can be seen in the background of scenes in “How to Win Friends and Influence Monsters” (7.09). Neither the comment nor the set dressing would pose a barrier to a casual viewer enjoying or understanding the episodes, but a fan would understand the shared reference with the producers.

Breaking the fourth wall is a well-known technique in theatre with characters talking directly to the audience. However, any time the audience is reminded that what they are watching is a fiction, or are drawn more directly into the action, it can be seen as breaking that fictional barrier between fan and artifact, between fan and character. Sera Gamble and Ben Edlund discuss this on the commentary track at the end of the episode “The French Mistake”(6.15). Edlund expresses concern over “lifting the veil” and revealing the magic. Gamble hopes that having pulled back the curtain on the nuts and bolts of television production and the show itself has not “ruined” the show and the viewing experience for the fan. This practice can also be referred to as a technique of metafiction, the self-conscious reference of fictional devices within fiction or, in this case, television as television. It takes a special relationship to be able to do this without alienating the audience, and *Supernatural* relies on fans having behind-the-scenes knowledge of the show and its production and an interest in the same. *Supernatural*, in fact, has managed to draw its audience closer by using a number of techniques. Jenkins has used the term “participatory culture,” which he “contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship” (*Convergence Culture* 3). Deery also comments on this new relationship:

Viewers may now join a community of critical readers whose attention to the show’s production and to the program as artifact may in fact alter the ontological status of the show-as-perceived-by-viewers, producing a postmodern self-reflexivity – what Umberto Eco has termed “neo-television” – even when this self-consciousness was not embedded in the show by its producers. (175)

Fans of *Supernatural* are clearly participating as critical readers. This influence allows for more depth in viewers’ experience; it allows them to enter the show itself in new ways, and it allows the producers to write in different ways.

Arguably, the first episode to at least address the fourth wall was season two's "Hollywood Babylon"(2.18). In the episode, the two brothers investigate a haunting on a movie set. The writers use the premise to explore some of the issues that the show had to deal with in relation to production pressures. While this episode does not employ any characters talking directly to the camera, it does rely on viewers having "inside" knowledge of the show. In essence, fandom had already broken through that fourth wall to take a more active role in viewing. In one scene, the studio executive says to the director: "Everyone at the studio loves the dailies, myself included. We were just wondering if it could be a little brighter." The director replies, "Brad, this is a horror movie." To which the studio executive responds, "Who says horror has to be dark? It's sort of depressing, don't you think?" This is based on actual notes that the *Supernatural* production received from Warner Brothers' executives. Naturally the show is quite deliberately shot and lit to be dark and atmospheric, reflecting and enhancing the subject matter (horror), and this production value is appreciated by fans. Further references to the studio/production relationship as strained are the director's exasperated "Suits!" comment, and after the studio executive is killed, Martin wonders if they should not shut the production down out of respect. The director replies, "We had a moment of silence for him at breakfast. He was just a studio guy." By contrast, they do shut down production when the producer is killed. The episode is an opportunity for the producers to exorcise some of their own frustrations, but the episode relies on having a sympathetic audience in its fans to recognize the non-traditional monsters at play in the episode. The insight into the production aspects of the show is also a good example of one of the ways that Fairclough points out semiosis figures in social practices. According to Fairclough, "semiosis figures in representations. Social actors acting within any field or organization produce representations of other practices, as well as ('reflexive') representations of their own practices"("Cultural Discourse Analysis" 7). The producers have drawn the fans into the middle of the discussion with the studio through this reflexive representation of how the show is produced.

Dean becomes a PA (personal assistant) on the set to enable them to investigate. A PA is the lowest position one can hold on set, and when Dean asks what a PA is, Sam replies, "I think they're kind of like slaves." At first Dean says, "Being a PA sucks," but

he quickly embraces the role and tells Sam later in the episode that “It’s not so bad. I kind of feel like part of the team, you know?” This is a nice shout out to how close the entire production crew are known to be. Recently, Jensen Ackles remarked at a convention that over the seven seasons of the show they had changed only about 30 of the 200 crew members from the first episode (Creation’s Salute to Supernatural, Las Vegas, 2013). In fact, many of the actual production crew are extras in this episode. This relatively unusual stability within the family of the actual production crew has allowed fans to get to know these people as well as the actors. Fans interact with production crew at conventions and on Twitter, and fans are often welcomed by the production crew when fans show up at location while the show is being shot.⁴⁵ While the portrayal in “Hollywood Babylon” (2.18) is a way to break the fourth wall for those who follow information about the production, Dean’s longing to be part of a team is also an integral part of the plot for the season. Dean has always placed family first and in season two is struggling with the loss of his father and his loss of that family dynamic. Dean is able to fit in and become a part of the crew so quickly that he is able to get help from the sound editor and get all the dailies to view from another crew member. The theme of family is a strong one that extends from the storyline to the crew to the fans.

There are a number of other shout outs to members of the *Supernatural* family in “Hollywood Babylon” (2.18). Another insider joke is when Dean has a fan-moment with Tara, the star of the movie, and tells her that he loved her in *Boogeyman*. Her response is, “What a terrible script, but thank you!” Tara’s acceptance of fan-Dean is a reflection of the producers acceptance of their own fans. The joke in Tara’s comment is that the creator and show runner of *Supernatural*, Eric Kripke, wrote *Boogeyman*. The joke, of course, is self-deprecating on Kripke’s part, humanizing him and bringing him closer to the fans. In other interviews, Kripke has credited the writers’ room with the rich characterization in the show, stating that without them, you would simply have more *Boogeyman* (Superwiki). There are other significant self-reflexive references that devoted

⁴⁵ On one occasion, after the final cut was called, director Phil Sgriccia called all the cast and crew together and they thanked and clapped for the fans who were there watching the filming. Supernatural Support, *Tumblr*. <http://nueva-spn.tumblr.com/post/9599049640/another-supernatural-on-set-7x05-incl-the-crew>.

fans will understand. The director tells Tara that “Ivan and the other FX guys” will make the tennis ball she has to pretend is a ghost look scary in post production. Ivan Hayden is the visual effects supervisor on *Supernatural*. The director in the episode is McG, who is an executive producer on the show. The fake trailer for *Hell Hazers II* in the middle of the episode references the two *Charlie’s Angels* movies that the real McG directed, and the trailer makes up two other horror movies by the same producers as *Hell Hazers* that are based on two, season one, episodes of *Supernatural*. *Cornfield Massacre* features clips from the episode “Scarecrow” (1.11), and *Monster Truck* features clips from the episode “Route 666” (1.13).

Dean initially wants to take the case in Los Angeles as a break for the brothers from a series of intense cases. Sam complains, however, that the weather is “practically Canadian”. The show is shot in Canada and this is another reference that the more engaged fans of season two will understand. By season six, fans can be expected to know the show is shot in Canada, and in “The French Mistake” (6.15), Dean is dismayed that they are in Canada, which he discovers as they cross one of the bridges into Vancouver. Dean also bemoans all the conversations about hockey that he is forced to endure and looks askance at the “colourful” Canadian money. The murder that initially attracts the brothers to the case in “Hollywood Babylon” (2.18) turns out to be staged to garner attention for the movie. When they question the actor who played the dead crew member on the set, he explains that “It’s all about new media – creating a buzz.” This also resonates with fans of the show, who have a very strong and active online presence, which has been a significant factor in keeping the show on the air for so long. These initial episodes that gently pushed the fourth wall and were met with positive audience reaction helped to pave the way for more concerted deconstruction of the fourth wall in subsequent seasons.

Dean is also established as a fanboy in his own right with both Tara and Gerard in “Hollywood Babylon”, a character trait that comes up again in “Changing Channels” (5.08) when Dean’s attention to detail allows him to realize that Dr. Sexy is actually the Trickster because Dr. Sexy is wearing the wrong shoes. *Dr Sexy M.D.* is Dean’s guilty pleasure, but the fact that he knows Dr. Sexy should be wearing cowboy boots – “they’re what make him sexy” – is an important detail in helping the brothers solve their situation

in the episode; being a fan is cast in a positive light. In “Frontierland” (6.18), the object of Dean’s fannish passion is Clint Eastwood. In this episode, Dean’s enthusiasm is cast in a completely comic light as his insistence on their dressing “authentically,” according to Eastwood westerns, for their trip to the old west turns out to be a far cry from the actuality of the time period. In season seven’s episode “Time After Time” (7.12), Dean is again thrust into the past where he is able to work with one of his heroes: Elliot Ness. Once again, Dean becomes the fanboy relying on his movie version of Ness. Ness is not like the character from *The Untouchables*, but Dean’s discomfort over the differences is mainly due to Ness not understanding Dean’s references rather than any disappointment in the “real” person. Dean’s fannish behaviour is usually a bit over the top and given comic overtones but in an endearing way. In most encounters, Dean is faced with a disparity between the reality and the illusion, much as any fan must deal with a disparity between character and actor.

Insider jokes or “easter eggs”⁴⁶ are another on-going way that *Supernatural* invites the fans in and rewards them for their attention to detail. Casual viewers are unlikely to realize that the picture of the Grand Marshall on the banner hanging across the street in “Good God Y’All” (5.02) really is Jerry Wanek, the production designer for the show. Bobby Singer is actually named after one of the executive producers and directors of the show, Robert Singer. Singer, in fact, had nothing to do with naming the character. When *Supernatural* shatters the fourth wall and shakes the other three walls in “The French Mistake”(6.15), by dropping the Winchester brothers in an alternate universe where they are the actors Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, Dean and Sam point out that anyone who names a character after himself is a “douchebag.” In Singer’s defence, he was just as surprised as anyone to find out that the character had been named after him while he was away from the production for a mere few days. In later seasons, Dean and Sam have been seen drinking Margiekugel beer from Wisconsin, for example in “The Slice Girls” (7.12). It is named for Jerry Wanek’s mother. The character Jamie in the

⁴⁶ For a more fulsome explanation of easter eggs in media see this entry on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easter_egg_%28media%29; For specific references to easter eggs in *Supernatural* see Superwiki http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Easter_Eggs

episode “Monster Movie” (4.05) is actually named after a fan who wrote to Kripke telling him how much the show meant to her and how it had helped her deal with an ongoing illness. Another fan, the author S.E. Hinton, is actually an extra in “Slash Fiction”(7.06). She has visited the set on a semi-regular basis since show runner Kripke discovered she was a fan of the show and has been invited to visit the writers’ room in Los Angeles as well. Her novel *The Outsiders* has also been referred to obliquely in “Death Takes a Holiday” (4.15), and the theme of the novel certainly resonates with *Supernatural*.

Producers recognize that fans of *Supernatural* and its stars will be fans of other productions that the stars have been involved in and be knowledgeable about those productions as well. The producers rely on this knowledge when in “Changing Channels” (5.08), Dean, who is a fan of *Dr. Sexy MD*, the *Grey’s Anatomy* spoof, explains to Sam who does not watch the show that there is a ghost on the show. Sam is taken aback and wonders why there would be a ghost on a medical show. The inside joke is that the ghost on *Grey’s Anatomy*, named Denny, was played by Jeffery Dean Morgan, who also played John Winchester on *Supernatural*. In “The Man Who Would Be King” (6.20), there is a lovely shout out to a former character played by Jim Beaver. In this episode, there is a demon equivalent to Bobby (Jim Beaver) who is called Ellesworth, the name of Beaver’s character on *Deadwood*. Fans would recognize Rob Benedict’s band, Loudon Swain’s music in the episode “The Slice Girls” (7.13) from season seven. Benedict played Chuck Shirley in seasons four and five. These details are yet another indication that producers are becoming increasingly aware of the wider connections that fans make and the loyalty that fans demonstrate. That loyalty can be exploited in the show’s continuing success, but it can also be exploited in allowing the producers to craft subtly interwoven allusions.

Fans have been invited into both the episodes that Jensen Ackles directed via nods to other Ackles’ projects. In “Weekend at Bobby’s” (6.04), Ackles’ directorial debut, the episode opens with a television newscast playing in the background. The voiceover in the newscast was done by Ackles’ father, Alan Ackles, who is also an actor. Alan Ackles appears as a police officer in the season eight episode “Heartache” (8.03), also directed by his son. In “The Girl Next Door” (7.03), there are two additional shout-outs to other Ackles’ projects. A clerk at the store, questioned by Dean, is wearing a *Batman, Under the Red Hood* t-shirt. Ackles supplied the voice for the Red Hood in the video. When

Sam slips away and leaves Dean in the cabin, the television is announcing the movie about to play is *My Bloodiest Valentine in 3D*. Ackles starred in the 3-D thriller *My Bloody Valentine*. A viewer does not have to know about these connections or allusions to understand or enjoy the story, but these allusions add another level of reward for viewers who have that depth of knowledge. Producers understand that the fans' knowledge base will spread out from the show itself, however, and this allows for creativity to expand through these allusions.

Three episodes do employ a character speaking directly into the camera, for very different effects. In season seven's "Slash Fiction" (7.06) Leviathan Sam and Dean speak directly into the camera, and they seem to be breaking the fourth wall only in the fictional universe. However, in both the fictional universe and on the viewer's television screen, the effect is to draw the viewer in to the carnage they are perpetrating. In both instances, the Leviathan versions of the brothers are sending a clear message to the authorities that Sam and Dean Winchester are crazed serial killers, and they use the security camera in one robbery and a cell phone in another to record their actions and taunt authorities. In both cases, they wink at the camera. In the first instance, the episode begins with what appears to the viewer to be the real Sam and Dean robbing a bank. Just before the brothers kill all the hostages, Dean looks at the security camera, smiles and winks. Dean is looking directly at the camera and the viewer when he winks. This is a signal to the audience that this is not really Dean; in essence, the wink lets the viewer into the "joke".

In "Changing Channels" (5.08), Dean and Sam are trapped in an alternate 'television' universe by the Trickster, who the audience learns in this episode is actually the archangel Gabriel. While trapped in a sitcom, Dean turns to the camera with his catch phrase "sonuvabitch" but says it in a way to garner laughs, not the way he normally says it. Interestingly, this phrase is also spoken by Tara in the movie within "Hollywood Babylon" (2.18). In neither instance are we meant to take the situation seriously. Sam also addresses the camera directly in the Herpaxia commercial. The instances of Sam and Dean addressing the camera in "Changing Channels" (5.08) and in "Slash Fiction" (7.06) are actually indications to the audience that they are not entirely themselves. The entire "Changing Channels" episode allowed the show to provide commentary on the television industry, critiquing such television fare as *CSI Miami*, Japanese game shows,

commercials, and *Grey's Anatomy*. The devoted fan base of *Supernatural* has been vital to keeping the show on the air even though viewership for shows like *CSI Miami* and *Grey's Anatomy* were much greater. The producers and fans would agree on the superiority of *Supernatural* over these other shows with lame ghost stories and less than stellar acting. Padalecki and Ackles certainly embrace lampooning David Caruso's acting skills which fans greatly appreciated. The overall structure of this episode follows the brothers' own trajectory, jumping from drama to comedy to game show and back to drama. The episode is full of comedy and the Trickster, who one expects to subject the brothers to comic discomfort, keeps admonishing the brothers to play their roles. The lesson that the Trickster is trying to teach them is to play the roles that God has decreed for them – to be the vessels for Lucifer and Michael. In the end, the show takes a decidedly dramatic turn with the revelation that the Trickster is the archangel Gabriel. The producers rely on their fans being critical consumers of television to appreciate both the critique of the television industry within the episode and how the plot actually advances the mytharc of the show.

In "The Man Who Would Be King" (6.20), Castiel addresses the audience directly to explain the actions that have occurred off camera for the majority of season six. This technique allows the character to remain at least partially sympathetic to the fans even while the fans are as shocked as the characters in the show by the revelations. The episode begins with a close up of the angel, sitting alone in his favorite version of Heaven. He begins to talk, and he reminds the viewer that he has been around since the dawn of time and has witnessed all of human history, but the most important thing he has to impart to the viewer is about his story. He asks, "Let me tell you my story," and then looks directly at the camera before delivering his next line: "Let me tell you everything." One of the reasons he is telling the viewer his story is because he has been unable to tell Dean his story, and it is really Dean who he wants to explain his actions to because it is Dean who has exemplified free will and choice for Cas. The episode itself unfolds with cuts back and forth over the year as Cas attempted to defeat Raphael in Heaven and turned, in desperation, to Crowley for help. The quick cuts back and forth help to mimic the urgency and desperation that Cas was feeling, helping to keep him sympathetic to the audience. The last scene returns to the beginning with Cas sitting in his heaven. He looks

up and down, but never directly at the camera as he asks his “Father” one last time for guidance to stay his hand. It remains ambiguous whether he is still addressing the audience here, God, or Dean. Dean is a possibility because Cas calls for understanding again and in the previous scene Dean tells Cas – as he has on many other occasions – “You are a friggin’ child.” Dean has been Cas’s mentor and father figure in many ways. In addition, Cas is calling strongly on the audience to understand why he has done what he has. Season six was not the show’s most popular season, and Castiel’s plea for understanding can be seen as a plea from the writers for understanding from the audience.

Supernatural breaks the fourth wall, perhaps most significantly, in its own unique way in “Monster at the End of This Book” (4.18) in season four. With this episode, the show actually brings the fans and the audience right into the world of *Supernatural* when Dean and Sam discover a series of books have been published about their lives. Not surprisingly, there are a number of details that will be apparent only to the more dedicated fans, but even regular, casual viewers will likely recognize that the penname of the author of the books, Carver Edlund, is actually a confluence of two writers for the show, Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund. It has been speculated that the publisher of the books is actually based loosely on a fan. The character’s name is Sera Siege – a confluence of two more *Supernatural* writers: Sera Gamble and Julie Siege. The character’s protectiveness of Carver Edlund’s real identity in the face of “bad” fans can also be seen as a parallel for the passion the *Supernatural* fandom has for its artifact. It turns out that the novels are no longer being printed because there were not enough fans to keep it in print. This parallels the nervous wait for *Supernatural* to be renewed each season. The fanbase is small, but it is passionate, leading to *Supernatural* winning the first ever fan-chosen cover of TV Guide in 2010 and People’s Choice awards for best SciFi Drama in 2010, 2012, and 2013 (Superwiki). Even more astounding was *Supernatural*’s win for best network drama overall at the People’s Choice Awards in 2012. Not surprising was *Supernatural* winning the People’s Choice Award for best fandom in 2013 (Superwiki). It does benefit the show to cultivate this close relationship with the fans. These awards also demonstrate the engagement fans have with the show as these awards are a direct result of fans active online voting. They are one more way that producers can tangibly demonstrate fan engagement when negotiating with advertisers.

Sam and Dean's discovery and exploration of the fandom and the books gives the actors and the show a unique way to have a discussion with, and about, the fans. Dean is appalled by the graphic nature of some of the novels, such as *Route 666*, and Ackles has not been shy about his reluctance to take his shirt off unless it is actually a function of the plot, regardless of fan requests to the contrary. Those requests find an answer in the covers of the books which do depict the brothers shirtless. The brothers discover the online community of fans, fan fiction, slash, sam girls, dean girls and the phenomenon of wincest⁴⁷. Both of them are appalled by wincest, prompting Dean to ask, "They do know we're brothers, right?" They also discover fan Simpatico, who was an actual poster on Television Without Pity, who was eventually banned from the for posting overly negative comments. This episode is the perfect vehicle for the show to address its fans. By the end of this episode, Dean and Sam discover that Chuck Shirley – Carver Edlund's real name – is actually a prophet. Chuck is a little reluctant to believe it but finally says, "I write things and then they come to life. Yeah, no, I'm definitely a god. A cruel, cruel, capricious god." This foreshadows the eventual revelation that Chuck actually is God, and a metaphor for Kripke, the one who initially created the show and brought Dean and Sam to life. It is no accident that Chuck disappears into the light at the end of "Swan Song" (5.22) – the last episode that Kripke was showrunner for. The voice-over in "Swan Song" is an opportunity for Kripke to break the fourth wall and address fans almost directly. Chuck states that "Endings are hard," and there is no question that that remark is directed at fans. Kripke is having a hard time wrapping up his five year story arc. One of the biggest stumbling blocks in Kripke's path is that he cannot really end it; the story must continue into season six. This is also an ending of his relationship with the fans, as well.

In the season five opener, "Sympathy for the Devil" (5.01), the audience is introduced to Becky, the super-fan. Chuck asks her to deliver a message to Sam and Dean because it is not safe for him to do so himself. She tells Chuck that she is his number one fan when in reality she is a samgirl⁴⁸ of the most devoted variety. In effect, by telling her

⁴⁷ See note 39 in chapter 4.

⁴⁸ Fans self identify as samgirls or deangirls if they have a preference for one of the brothers.

that Sam and Dean Winchester are real, he has broken the fourth wall into the novels. Fan response to Becky was mixed. Her portrayal is a little over the top. She obviously has few and poor social skills and is not fashionably dressed. When she meets Sam, she is almost hyperventilating and will not stop touching him – much as many fans react at fan conventions upon meeting Padalecki and Ackles. This is also the way Dean acts when he meets Dr. Sexy in “Changing Channels” (5.08). Becky was most objected to by “samgirls” because she is an aggressive Sam-fan, casting them in a poor light. Fans who favour Dean or do not favour either brother seemed to have an easier time making fun of or simply accepting Becky. Yet, in the end, she does provide valuable information for the brothers and serves a useful function in the episode even if her obsession with Sam is a little creepy.

It is somewhat difficult to judge how fans are perceived by the show in these first few encounters, but a close textual analysis reveals that the show made an effort to be more sympathetic in their portrayal of fans in “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09). Some fans felt they were being mocked, but it is important to remember that the show had already essentially mocked both itself and the studios which are its direct superiors. In “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09), Dean and Sam are actually tricked by Becky into attending the first ever fan convention for the Carver Edlund novels. Throughout the course of the episode, however, the brothers learn something about the fans and the fans help them gain a new perspective on their own story. Again, this mirrors the close relationship between the show and its fans. Dean, in particular, has been struggling to find the purpose in what they do, and Barnes and Damian, who are larping as Sam and Dean, offer that purpose: “You’re wrong, you know. About *Supernatural*. I’m not sure you get what the story’s about. In real life? He sells stereo equipment. I fix copiers. *Our* lives suck. But to be Sam and Dean? To wake up every morning and save the world? To have a brother who would die for you. Well, who wouldn’t want that?” Barnes explains to Dean what makes the books popular to fans, speaking as the writers, letting fans of the show know that the writers understand what the core of appeal is for them. Dean is a little taken aback when he finds out that Barnes and Damian are a couple, but he also has grudging respect for why they have come together to form such a strong partnership and it helps him shore up his flagging motivation to keep going in the hunt for Lucifer. Here again the show is

referencing wincest and slash fan fiction but in a more sympathetic way. Becky has finally turned her sights on a more appropriate love interest in Chuck in this episode, and she proves to be extremely useful when her encyclopaedic knowledge of the books allows her to help the brothers locate the colt: the weapon they hope will kill Lucifer. The fan and the producer end the episode as a harmonious couple embodied by Becky and Chuck. Later, Dean learns that Chuck is no longer seeing Becky in “Swan Song” (5.22). He tells Dean he “wasn’t good enough for her.” Kripke is clearly sympathetic to the fans, but this may also be interpreted as an oblique reference to the fact that no matter what happened on the show, someone, some faction of the fans, would not be happy about it.

A much less flattering version of Becky emerges in “Season Seven: Time for a Wedding” (7.08). Becky stoops to using a love potion to trick Sam into marrying her. When Becky gets tickets to her high school reunion, the girl checking her in calls her “yucky-Becky” – her nickname from high school. Becky is portrayed as a loser. Given her knowledge of hunting from reading the novels, which is also showcased in the episode, Becky should know better than to dabble in witchcraft. It should have occurred to Becky that her “friend” was not, in fact, even a witch, but a demon. Becky tries to explain herself and her actions to Sam:

I know what I am, ok. I’m a loser. In school. In life.... Honestly? The only place people understood me was the message boards. They were grumpy and overly literal but at least we shared a common passion. And I’ll take it, you know? I met you guys. The real Sam and Dean. And I started dating Chuck. And everything was amazing. But you left and Chuck dumped me.

This speech does paint a more sympathetic view of what fandom can offer people: a place where they feel they can belong. However, it also intimates that that sense of belonging is fleeting and will prove to be unsatisfying. It is important to realize that this is the producers’ interpretation of what a fan is: the producers’ way of holding a mirror back up to fandom. That image shifts over the course of the series. In the end, Sam tells her that he likely will not see her again, but he does take pity on her somewhat and tells her, “You’re not a loser, ok? You’re a good person and you’ve got lots of energy so just do your thing, whatever that is, and the right guy will find you.” The portrait of Becky we have at the end of the episode is of a not-too-bright, lonely loser, but Sam is not wrong to caution her about being obsessive.

“Season Seven: Time for a Wedding” (7.08) seems to focus on the fan who is too immersed in the show. Another possible reading is that Becky is a stand in for Sera Gamble – much as Chuck was for Kripke. There has been little doubt that Gamble herself is a Sam-girl, like Becky. Gamble has been ostracized by fans – much like “yucky-Becky” – and she needed to stop pursuing Kripke’s vision of *Supernatural* and let the right vision come to her. At the very least, this curiously bitter version of fandom comes at a time when Gamble was very much under siege from fans who were not happy about the direction she was taking with the show. Fan reaction to this version of Becky saw this as a negative comment from the show about fans which did not seem consistent with the previous incarnations of Becky and fandom in general, and many fans refuse to acknowledge this episode as part of canon. The ability of fans to reject an episode in this way is admittedly limited. The episode cannot be unmade. However, the producers are certainly aware of the degree of fan rejection for this episode, and it does remain within the power of producers to “course correct.” To date, Carver has not included Becky in any storylines, but there has been one oblique, but positive, reference to Becky in “Slumber Party” (9.04). Certainly, *Supernatural* has not flinched from being equally critical of itself or shied away from making light of itself in episodes such as “The French Mistake” (6.15) where most of the cast and crew are portrayed ironically.

As already noted, writer Ben Edlund referred to “The French Mistake” (6.15) as being “as meta as meta gets” on the commentary track of the season six Blu-ray. In this episode, Dean and Sam find themselves in an alternate universe where they are perceived as Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, actors on the CW show *Supernatural*. Unlike “Hollywood Babylon” (2.18), the only people to play themselves in this episode, due to clearance issues, are Lou Bollo, the stunt co-ordinator, Todd Scott, Mike Carpenter, Misha Collins, and Genevieve Padalecki. Throughout the commentary track and on the trivia track for the Blu-ray, the audience is repeatedly told that this is not how the actual person is in real life. Actors, for the most part, play the rest of the crew, although virtually every crew member volunteered to be shot (and killed) in the massacre scene. On the commentary track, Gamble credits Tina Fey and *30 Rock* for guidance in how to parody herself and the other members of the production team. Gamble also notes that “the reason we can do this episode... [is] because we were confident that you guys [the

audience] were interested on some level in how the show is made. I'm not sure every television show on the air could with such confidence" count on that engagement. The episode does provide unprecedented access to the inner workings of the show.

During the course of the episode, Dean and Sam walk through a number of sets used in the series: Bobby's house, the dragon's lair tunnel from "Like a Virgin" (6.12), the spider's lair from "Unforgiven" (6.13), and the backlot from *Watchmen* that *Supernatural* used on a number of occasions. Fans visit the backlot regularly via location tours put on by the Creation Conventions held yearly in Vancouver. Seeing sets outside of the episodes in which they were filmed in essence invites the fans right on to the set, giving them access it is impractical for them to get in reality. The episode also features the real catering trucks, Padalecki and Ackles' set chairs, the exterior of Ackles' trailer, a number of awards the show had won, the 8 Impalas used by the show, continuity photos, *Supernatural* magazine, a clip of Ackles from his time on *Days of Our Lives* as Eric Brady, Padalecki's real wedding photograph and his real wife. Some of the details for "characters" were drawn from real life, such as director Bob Singer's fondness for Diet Coke and Eric Kripke's insistence that his stand-in wear New Balance running shoes, not Nikes. The casting directors for the show were initially concerned about the reception by the real people of the actors cast to play them, according to Gamble. Everyone was pleased with the final result, however, and no one more than Kripke, who was particularly fond of his death scene – a hero's death. Kripke was only on set in the episode because Jim Michaels (the show's producer), Bob Singer, and Kevin Parks (assistant director) did not think that "the boys" (Padalecki and Ackles) would know who Gamble was if she came up to try to get them back on track and back to work for the episode. Gamble goes so far as to kill off Kripke in the episode – perhaps to finally put his ghost to rest.

The episode also alludes to other industry-specific jokes. In addition to the reference to showrunners or executives having to rein in difficult stars, there are repeated references to "at least they're talking." There are many infamous stories about co-stars not getting along. It is well known, however, that Ackles and Padalecki are good friends in reality. Both stood up for the other at their weddings, and they even lived together for most of season four. At one point, Bob Singer asks them if giving them more money will

get them back to work. Dean remarks that they are already paid too much – the irony is obvious. In the same scene, Singer equates doing drugs and smuggling black market organs with making up lines and states that their careers should be their top priority over anything else. Singer also alludes in one scene to Dean Kane and the show *Lois and Clark*, which the real Singer, director Phil Sgriccia and Jim Michaels all worked on (IMDb; Superwiki). The studio which the show is shot in, in the episode, is KM Studios – a tribute to Kim Manners who was an executive producer and oversaw production in Vancouver for the first four seasons of the show, until his death. Kevin Parks the assistant director in the episode, works on all the odd numbered episodes of the series (even-numbered episodes are covered by John MacCarthy), and this was episode 6.15. Finally, the unflappable, French Canadian director of photography, Serge Ladouceur, is seen with his ever present laser pen. When the massacre happens, he is seen calmly dodging bullets and is one of the few crew members to escape death at the hands of the gun toting angel, Virgil. Ladouceur was not immediately recognized by fans, and Gamble laughs about speculation that appeared online after the episode aired that the mysterious French crew member was an angel. Gamble and others in production were still closely monitoring the chatter online for reaction to episodes.

One character who was easily recognized by audience members is Misha Collins who plays Castiel. Collins has a particularly unique and close relationship with the fans. Collins has even used this relationship to form the basis of the charitable foundation Random Acts, providing yet another way for fans to engage with their cultural artifact. For “The French Mistake” (6.15), Collins asked the writers to make him as “douchy” as possible in the episode, so he is seen shoving a make-up person out of his way and referring to a PA as “little guy.” He is also seen tweeting his fans obsessively. Collins does have a strong twitter following (1,155,279 as of November 11, 2013). The communication circuit is not reciprocal in Collins’ case, however, as he only occasionally follows one person for a time and rarely engages with anyone on Twitter. Collins’ tweets are never as mundane as those tweeted during the episode and his followers are his “minions” not “mishamigos” as in the episode. However, in keeping with the meta-textual nature of the episode, Collins live-tweeted the same tweets that his character was tweeting during the episode on both east and west coast feeds of the original airing.

Many aspects of the show were both part of the shattering of the fourth wall and also part of the ongoing episode and storyarc. At the end of the first scene, leading into the credits, there is a smart slate to mark the scene. The shot goes directly from the snap of the slate to the shattering of a mirror which was the title card for season six. The season centred on Castiel's betrayal and that everything was not as it seemed. This shattering of a dark mirror is particularly appropriate for this episode. This reflection of reality is also seen twice more in the episode. When Dean and Sam burst through the window (again, shattering glass), the angel-power that sent them through ruins the shot of the "stunt." The production team decide that they can save the shot by using a freeze frame. Later in the episode when Dean and Sam are once again drawn by angel-power back through a window, the scene freeze frames just before they hit the window. The second mirrored scene occurs between the scene in which Dean and Sam are pretending to act with Collins and the final scene with Castiel. In both scenes the characters are blocked in a triangle with Castiel/Collins closest to the camera. In the first shot, when they are "acting", Sam is to the left of Collins and Dean to the right. In the final scene with Castiel, their positions are reversed. Season six was meant to be a film noir plot, with nothing as it seemed. The juxtaposition of these scenes helps to highlight that plot point while mirroring that the episode itself holds up a fun house-type mirror to the reality of production.

As this chapter has demonstrated, *Supernatural* has the unique ability to engage its audience in a dialogue. Jenkins states that "convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture"(243).

Supernatural relies on its fans to understand what is at play between the show and its viewers. This community can criticize and make fun of itself, much as any family can. One of the core themes in the show is the importance of family, and this helps the fans to engage with the show and those who produce it in a very unique way. Breaking the fourth wall allows both the show and the fans to continue to negotiate the unique space that has been created between them. D'Acci's circuit model brings greater understanding to how

this relationship functions, creating a balance of power among production, reception, and artifact. The increased engagement of fans through the Internet and the interest in production coupled with the interest of production to engage with fans results in a singular discussion centered on *Supernatural*.

7 Conclusion: The Road From Here

This thesis demonstrates an increasing influence by fans on the artifact of their attentions through an increasingly close relationship to the producers of that artifact. The importance of this research is its implications for changes in media and communication theory and its implications for the television industry itself. *Supernatural* is an obvious point of inquiry due to its situation at the confluence of a number of forces. It came on the air in 2005 at a time when genre television was rising in popularity. Fans and sci-fi “nerds” and “geeks” were beginning to be seen in a more favourable light by both society and production and were gaining in hegemonic cache in both society and industry. Being a fan was being facilitated by the rise in digital communications and access. Television was looking for new ways to monetize in an increasingly digital and competitive market place. All of these factors have facilitated a unique dialogue to grow between fans and producers of *Supernatural*. The manifestations of this dialogue can be seen within the television show itself. Producers are able to step away from genre expectations and rely on fans’ knowledge base to push creative boundaries. Yet, an increased sense of entitlement and the pressure to please the fans at all costs may also put a chill on creativity.

In Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, the show can be seen as the habitus with the various social agents influencing it inhabiting its field. The social agents would include producers, fans, advertisers, actors, networks, and studios (*Field of Cultural* 65). Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of structural relations in constructing an object, stating that it is “manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups or institutions” (*Field of Cultural* 29). The text of the show is influenced by individual fans, writers, and showrunners (the role that actors play in crafting an individual character has not been considered in this thesis); groups of writers (i.e. the writers’ room), network executives, fan campaigns; and institutions such as fandom itself or television as an industry. Bourdieu’s approach to cultural production centres on the struggle for hierarchical dominance between

the heteronomous principle, favorable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. ‘bourgeois art’) and the autonomous principle (e.g. ‘art for art’s sake’), which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise. [sic] (*Field of Cultural* 40)

Furthermore, this hierarchy is in constant flux as the “degree of autonomy varies considerably from one period and one national tradition to another, and affects the whole structure of the field. Everything seems to indicate that it depends on the value which the specific capital of writers and artists represents for the dominant factions” (*Field of Cultural* 40). Finally, Bourdieu states,

When the newcomers are not disposed to enter the cycle of simple reproduction, based on recognition of the ‘old’ by the ‘young’ – homage, celebration, etc. – and recognition of the ‘young’ by the ‘old’ – prefaces, co-option, consecration, etc. – but bring with them dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field, they cannot succeed without the help of external changes. (*Field of Cultural* 57)

The increased access to producers through the digital environment, particularly through such direct access as Twitter and pressure from the networks⁴⁹ to utilize this communication with fans for economic gain, are the very external changes that have fueled a change in the relationship between the producers and fans of *Supernatural*. Both the economic and political power of the fans is increasing and the power of production to remain autonomous is waning.

In early seasons, fans were flattered by acknowledgement of their concerns and even existence. Fan fiction and the thank you to Kripke paid for by and from the fans in *The Hollywood Reporter* at the end of his tenure, as well as attendance at multiple fan conventions were ways that fans paid homage and celebrated the show. The fans promised Kripke that “On whatever road you travel next, know that your fans will gladly shut their cakeholes and ride shotgun with you” (Superwiki, “Eric Kripke”). Of course, fans are just as likely not to shut their cakeholes and be vocal backseat drivers. Fans have been recognized by production through inclusion in the text itself, as well as a sensitivity

⁴⁹ See also Gray, *Television Entertainment* 68.

to fans' reception, such as getting rid of characters who were not well-received. The traditional hierarchy that sees producers in total control of the show is being challenged by an increased sense of entitlement by fans. In part, this is a result of what Jenkins, Ford, and Green describe as spreadable media. According to Jenkins, Ford, and Green, "Audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows, and producers,... are waking up to the commercial need to actively listen and respond to them" (2). Jenkins, Ford, and Green also stress the importance of the changes in technologies and "the social logics and cultural practices that have enabled and popularized these new platforms, logics that explain *why* sharing has become such a common practice, not just *how*" (emphasis in original, 3). This idea of flow corresponds to D'Acci's communication model, which also corresponds with Bourdieu's hierarchy, and all, in the case of *Supernatural*, point to a shift in emphasis in the communication model onto production and a shift in power toward the fan. This shift may lead to a chilling of the creative freedom of producers and the end result on the show is unclear. This shift is also a reflection of the shift that Fairclough identifies from political economy to a cultural political economy ("Critical Discourse Analysis" 10). This shift is facilitated by the inculcation of fans through the operationalization of production (Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis" 6-7).

Abbot points out that, like *The X-Files*, "*Supernatural* often challenge[s] the notion of an authoritative narrative voice through the introduction of differing subjective positions"(101). Sanvoss posits that what often draws fans to a particular show is that they identify with a particular character, thus seeing themselves within the text ("One-Dimensional" 832). It is not surprising that over time fans who have invested a great deal of time in watching, theorizing, and producing their own versions (via fanworks such as vidding and fan fiction) and have cultivated a relationship with producers through letter writing, tweeting, and convention appearances would develop a sense of entitlement to the product itself. Fan investment has led to numerous long-term fandoms, such as those deriving from *Buffy*, *Star Trek*, and *Lord of the Rings* to name but a few, developing factions within themselves. In *Supernatural*, there has long been a divide between the deangirls and samgirls. As previously examined in chapters two, three, and five, the show's popularity is closely tied to fan investment in characterization. This entitlement

coupled with ease of access and a growing awareness of the production elements which also empower them, has lead most recently to a very contentious campaign in the *Supernatural* fandom.

All fandoms have “ships,” short for relationships, that fans would like to see realized. Sometimes the chemistry generated by two actors is unexpected and something the producers will build on, frequently because of its popularity. Of course, the star-crossed lover trope is a staple in fiction, and television likes to draw the sexual/romantic tensions of a relationship out as long as possible to avoid what has become known as the “*Moonlighting*-curse.” Famously, when the two main characters were finally allowed to have a relationship on the show, something teased by producers for several seasons, the show’s ratings suddenly plummeted and it was cancelled. It seems once the wish is fulfilled, fans may no longer be interested. Relationships on *Supernatural* are complicated for a number of reasons already touched on in this thesis. The largely female viewership is resistant to the male leads being paired with any female character; however, they have paired them with each other almost since the start of the series. Fan fiction is full of wincest (Superwiki “Wincest”), which Dean and Sam discover in “The Monster at the End of the Book” (4.18). The other most popular pairing is Dean and Castiel, the portmanteau for which is Destiel. In fact, Superwiki identifies this pairing as the most popular pairing of the show (“Wincest”). Slash pairings of male characters who are represented within the canon as heterosexual have a long history, tracing back most notably, perhaps, to Kirk/Spock fan works. There has, however, never been a fan campaign to move that pairing explicitly into canon. This is partly explained by the many studies on fan shaming and fan marginalization which this thesis has sought to demonstrate are quickly becoming things of the past as demonstrated by the increased attention paid to fans by production.

Within the last six months, there have been several campaigns to promote Destiel becoming a relationship realized fully on screen. Fans’ rationale is that the writers have included ample evidence within the context of the show to support Dean and Castiel entering into a fully romantic relationship. This has lead to a schism between fans themselves within fandom, and it has lead to a push back by some of the more vocal writers on the show. The writers have been accused of “queer baiting,” hinting that there

may be a homosexual relationship between two characters and not following through. This is in contrast to “ship teasing.” The difference in nomenclature reflects an attitude to the subtext being supplied by the show. If a fan feels the writers are intentionally misleading, they are baiting; if a fan feels the writers are providing raw material for fans to continue with on their own, it is teasing.⁵⁰ Queer baiting has also been defined as “what happens when a series wants to attract a queer audience without alienating their homophobic/transphobic audience” (Zemmer). The *Urban Dictionary* defines queer baiting as “When a politician, pundit, or other public figure brings up the completely irrelevant detail about a person's sexuality, true or untrue, as a way of subtly channeling homophobia to attack them.”⁵¹ One of the tags on the entry is *Supernatural* demonstrating how preeminent the show is in this topic.

The latest campaign by Destiel supporters was a letter writing campaign to the network itself. Fans were determined to go over the heads of the showrunner and writers. This campaign displays both a feeling of entitlement by fans to influence the artifact of the show itself and also an in-depth knowledge of the production process and hierarchy. Finally, this demonstrates a self-awareness of fans’ own power in the hierarchy. Both Misha Collins (Castiel) and Jensen Ackles (Dean) have been accused of queer baiting (Superwiki “Destiel”). Collins’ remarks, especially at conventions, are generally intentionally meant to be contentious in a playful sparring with fans. Ackles’ comments are generally to underscore that canon does not explicitly support a romantic relationship between the pair and that he acts what has been written. The writers have also responded to fan questions. Angel K points out that “When fans get upset about something, many of them turn to Twitter. They tweet actors, writers, and producers in the hopes of having their voices heard. Twitter has provided a very unique platform for audience interaction and participation and sometimes, on very special occasions, fans get a response from

⁵⁰ This is a relatively new phenomenon that has been blogged about extensively in the last few months. Some examples discussing this issue, include the following: “Queer Baiting 101 with Not-Professor Jeff.” A Geek in the Community. May 20, 2013. <http://ageekinthecommunity.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/queer-baiting-101-with-not-professor-jeff/>; “Queer Baiting vs Fan Service vs Ship Teasing.” Wasting Time When I Should Be Working. <http://lurea.tumblr.com/post/35676303235/queer-baiting-vs-fan-service-vs-ship-teasing>

⁵¹ November 3, 2013. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=queer%20baiting>

those creators.” In fact, after numerous accusations of queer baiting writer Adam Glass did respond by Twitter. In a series of tweets his response was as follows:

Re: queer bating. The writers are a diverse group of open minded people from all walks of life. We write what feels right. It is not our job
 To tell you how to feel. We present. Much like a musician and a song. Our audience large and diverse as we are. So we speak to many and
 Hope that their is something for everyone to connect. For us to define love or what you feel about two characters is not our job. We love
 Last thing to say about this. I do not speak officially for #SPN just myself. I loving writing these characters for myself and the fans.
 But I do not appreciate me or the writer’s being called something that I have fought my whole life against. We have many gay friends, family and workers in our lives. And the utmost respect for the LGBT cause. But I did not create these characters so they are not mine to define.
 I know that is not good enough for some. But that is the truth. I write these characters for not any one group, but all. And I hope that you
 All can see a little bit of yourself in them, as I do when I write them. Peace. [sic] (qtd in Angel K)

This demonstrates that the writers are listening and listening closely to fans. Glass attempts to explain his own approach to writing, but clearly draws a line at what kind of criticism he is willing to accept from fans. He acknowledges the realities of working on a show: it is a collaborative effort in which he may not always be the one to create a character he then has to write for. Glass also acknowledges that he is writing for the fans to let them do what they wish with the characters, but in their own space.

There is ample evidence within the text of *Supernatural* to conclude that fans do have an influence on the final product. However, Glass’s series of tweets also indicates that fans’ interactions may have a chilling effect on the writers’ creativity, and this may cause the dialogue between fans and producers to be muted or cut off entirely, closing the communication channel to production. If the relationship becomes an adversarial one in which nothing the producers say is accepted at face value as either true or sincere by the fans, the producers may be less likely to try to engage in that dialogue. This may be the clash that Bourdieu was speaking of. Kurt Sutter, showrunner for *Sons Of Anarchy*, lashed out at those he felt were unfairly criticising his show on twitter. Sutter tweeted, “dear critics, cuntbloggers, i’ll apply your vast, brilliant advice about storytelling when your reviews are written in iambic pentameter” (@sutterink November 17, 2013). Sutter’s tweet clearly indicates his opinion that his writing is artistic storytelling and

those who are merely writing about television are not worthy to criticize him. Sutter may not like it, but as John Caldwell points out, “criticism and analysis – even when negative and internalized – help fuel the entertainment machine.... any interactivity (good, bad, or indifferent) is economically valuable to producers and has been a defining goal of broadcast television since its inception in the 1940s” (53). The simple give and take creatively between fans and producers is further complicated by the cultural economic elements alluded to by Fairclough and which are essential to television production. The time of being able to pull back completely from fan interactions is over.

In a recent article, Greg Yaitanes, showrunner of *Banshee* and former executive producer of *House MD*, explains that over the next five years “Twitter and TV eventually will be thought of as one and the same.” Yaitanes’ show *Banshee* makes use of multiple platform storytelling: “Twitter is instrumental in promoting that content and enabling fans to become brand ambassadors for our show.” How fans interact with a show is evolving rapidly, and according to Yaitanes, “The line between shows we watch and the way we watch them (and where) will continue to evolve. In five years, a writer-producer won’t be able to sell a show without a multiplatform plan to visualize the world you are going to create and how deep viewers can dive.” In fact, Yaitanes was one of the first nine original investors in Twitter and his love for technology has led to him embracing multi-platform storytelling and re-imagining the showrunners role: “As a showrunner and producer, I see my role in this shift as a bridge, linking the social world to the creative world. We need to get people to stop thinking of social media as marketing and instead as a storytelling opportunity.” Networks are already pressuring those on the production side to have more contact with fans through social media. As alluded to in the Introduction, Nielsen is now tracking Twitter use for ratings. One way for a network to boost Twitter traffic is to have an actor, writer, showrunner, or director live Tweet and engage with fans as a show is airing. This essentially lets the fan watch the show with them, giving and receiving real time feedback.

It is clear that fans have been invited in to the creative process. June Deery states that

[v]iewers may now join a community of critical readers whose attention to the show’s production and to the program as artifact may in fact alter the ontological status of the show-as-perceived-by-viewers, producing a postmodern self-

reflexivity – what Umberto Eco has termed “neo-television” – even when this self-consciousness was not embedded in the show by its producers. (175)

Supernatural is a perfect example of a show whose fans enjoy this new access to production and are also embedded within it closing the communication circuit envisioned by D’Acci in a way that is going to become increasingly significant in the future. When producers can engage their fans in such an immersive way, producers can almost ensure the economic survival of their creation. The other benefits of the relationship from the producers’ point of view may be an increased ability to be more artistically creative as demonstrated by the use of humour and fourth wall breaking by *Supernatural*. However, giving fans a greater say might also result in a creative chill for the producers when fans object vociferously to elements such as the women characters or the relationship as they perceive it between Dean and Castiel. As in any relationship, as both sides, fan and producer, get to know each other better, expectations are raised and disappointed. The changing economic landscape of television production and the increasing use of the digital environment will continue to influence the power hierarchy between these two groups. To date, *Supernatural* has been able to maximize this relationship both in terms of economics and cultural production, whether this will continue in the changing landscape remains to be seen.

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