

Supernatural: The End of the Road: A Reflection

Part One: THEN

Introduction

Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown

In the penultimate episode of season 1 of *Supernatural* (2005-2020), “Salvation” (1.21), John Winchester (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) discovers that the demon who murdered his wife Mary (Samantha Smith) and drove him and his sons, Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles), into a life of monster hunting has murdered one of his best friends and fellow hunters. Grief-ridden, angry and exhausted by the journey, John declares: “This ends—now. I’m ending it. I don’t care what it takes.” While an impassioned statement, anyone who is familiar with *Supernatural* will be aware that it did not end that night nor even at the end of the season. That particular mission, which originally aimed to destroy the yellow-eyed demon that killed Mary, finally concluded once and for all four years later in the finale of season 5. As all fans know, this was originally conceived to be the end of the show, hence the title “Swan Song” (5.22). But, of course, it wasn’t. Sam returned from the cage to which he was consigned with Lucifer, original showrunner Eric Kripke was replaced by Sera Gamble, and Crowley (Mark Shephard) and Castiel (Misha Collins) conspired to keep the Winchester boys in the hunt. The result was that the journey that began for Sam and Dean in 1983 in Lawrence, Kansas (and in September 2005 on the WB) continued for 15 years. That is until on March 22, 2019, when the show’s three main stars,

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Ackles, Padalecki and Collins, announced that season 15 would be its last. The end was finally nigh, although not, in fact, as nigh as we thought.

The original conceit for this special issue on *Supernatural* was as a virtual symposium of invited presenters to mark the show's conclusion. This would enable the participants the freedom to offer an immediate and more intuitive (but still informed) reflection, and to explore and discuss issues around the series in a format that is less formal and therefore more personal. Our idea was therefore to invite a number of scholars and fans with a recognized interest in *Supernatural* to offer their thoughts about the importance, resonance, legacy and also the problems of the series as it finally shuffled off the airways. This seemed like the right approach not only because we would be able to respond to the end of *Supernatural* quickly, but also because the response to *Supernatural* ending after 15 years for those of us who watch and write about the show is both professional and personal. Professionally, it was an opportunity to take a long view and consider from a television and horror studies perspective what *Supernatural* has meant for TV and/or for TV horror. Personally, it also offered the opportunity to reflect upon what *Supernatural*, and its ending, has meant for us and the show's many fans. *Supernatural*'s departure from the airways is both the end of an era and embodies for many a sense of personal loss. *Supernatural* is a global series, and thus in order for the work of those we approached to rapidly reach the widest possible audience—rather than talking mainly to each other—we elected not to hold a live event but rather to have the symposium appear in the pages of *Monstrum*, a specialist journal in the field of horror studies, available online and thus facilitating the immediacy of the symposium format.

At the time we approached the journal, shortly after the end of *Supernatural* was announced, the idea of using the pages of *Monstrum* as a virtual symposium seemed (to us at least), fairly innovative. But then, a year later, 2020 and all that happened.¹ Not only did online communication effectively replace the face to face in almost every walk of life, but of course the production and airing of the final episodes of *Supernatural* were postponed. Considering we were looking at a series that has been about the end of the world for 15 years, and which was supposed to have concluded ten years ago, the irony is not lost that it never occurred to us that the world as we knew it would *actually* change and the show would not, in fact, end when it said it would.

We faced a very Winchester-style choice; to admit defeat and give up, or to keep going and figure it out. This being about *Supernatural*, of course we decided, with the kind support of the editors of *Monstrum*, to forge ahead.

¹ Creepily enough, it was virtually one year to the day of the announcement of the end of the series that Canada, the US and the UK went into Covid-19 lockdown.

The upshot is that we elected to split the essays into two issues. Part one: THEN, which you are looking at now, comprises essays which the authors felt could be written without the need to see the final few episodes but which offer insight and reflection on what the series has meant over its long run. Part two: NOW, which will be published early in 2021, will contain essays that reflect upon the finale and its impact, focusing on fandom, religion, the Gothic and the philosophical underpinnings of the show.

Why *Supernatural* Matters

Having established *what* we are doing, the next most important thing to establish is *why* we are doing it. Why give this attention to *Supernatural*? It is not and never has been the biggest TV show in the world, and indeed has been consistently modest in terms of its viewing figures. It has a very loyal and vocal fan base but is by no means unique in this regard. It also isn't particularly progressive. *Supernatural* has been consistently white, cis, hetero and masculine, and has never adequately addressed its problems with representation (or lack thereof) of race, women and LGBTQ+ characters, even though it has had plenty of time (15 years and 325 episodes) to do so. Yet for all that (and more), as TV scholars and fans, we feel that both the series and its end raise important issues.

What underlies the significance of *Supernatural* is the simple fact of its longevity. It is the longest continuous-running live action fantasy TV series in American TV history and given the often-precarious nature of fantasy and especially horror on TV, this, in and of itself, makes the show worthy of attention. Furthermore, it is going off the air on its own terms, rather than being cancelled as so many series have been both before and since it began. As Erin Giannini points out in her essay in this volume, the staying power of *Supernatural* is down in part to its position as a tentpole series in the annual output of its home network, the CW, which in itself is still a relative newcomer, having started in 2006. *Supernatural* was one of the few shows that made the transition to the CW from its progenitors, UPN and the WB, and survived a number of uncertain years to become a key show for the network. The importance of the CW to *Supernatural* is highlighted by the far more precarious nature of its UK broadcast. While in the US the small but loyal viewership for the series became a stable audience for the channel, as Simon Brown discusses in his essay, in Britain low viewing figures meant that the series was shunted from one channel to another, from free-to-air to subscription only TV and back again, appearing and disappearing from schedules almost at random.

The (tragic) story of the UK broadcast of *Supernatural* highlights the fact that over 15 years it has become a series out of time in what is now a very different television landscape. It is, like Dean's car and his musical taste, a relic of a bygone age. *Supernatural's* chequered UK history harkens back to the old days of the 1990s and early 2000s when watching American TV in Britain required a considerable degree of patience, habitually waiting a full year for each season to arrive on terrestrial broadcast (hardly anyone had cable or satellite subscriptions then), or even longer for the storage-friendly brick-sized DVD box set. Particularly in the realm of cult and fantasy TV, those days are more or less over in an era where *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020) or *The Umbrella Academy* (2019-) drop worldwide on the same day on Netflix, or the UK's Sky Atlantic channel simulcast the final season of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) at 2am on a Monday. Furthermore, led by the likes of HBO, FX, Showtime and now Netflix, tentpole fantasy dramas like *Sabrina* or *GoT* or *The Walking Dead* (2010-) have standardised the shorter 16, 13, 10 and even 8 episode series, and the seasons can begin at any time of the year, while *Supernatural* still clings doggedly to the 1990s/early 2000s era format of 20-24 episodes per season, airing between the Fall and the Spring. The final episode of *Supernatural* therefore not only marks the end of the show, but also in many ways the final passing of the last series to emerge from that golden age of network fantasy TV which began in 1990 with *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) and gave life to *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *Angel* (1999-2004).

Throughout its extended life span the series has maintained a remarkable consistency. *Supernatural* has had the same two lead actors since the beginning (J&J, or J²), and has accumulated a loyal troupe of regular accompanying supporting players, including Misha Collins and Shepperd, Jim Beaver (Bobby), Mark Pellegrino (Lucifer), Kim Rhodes (Jody), Samantha Smith (Mary) and Rob Benedict (Chuck). Furthermore, the basic structure of a seasonal arc narrative interspersed with monsters-of-the-week cases has remained steady, give or take some occasional variation in the balance between them. Some things have changed. As a base the Impala and the grungy motel rooms gave way to Bobby's run-down junkyard and then to the bunker of the Men of Letters, while the villains have shifted from demons to Lucifer to angels to God's sister and finally to God himself. Throughout it all, however, the central focus of the series has unfailingly been the family-based, single-man-tear-inflected male melodrama that is the engine that drives the narrative relentlessly forward. While the series has focussed consistently on the Winchesters as brothers, as Janet K. Halfyard, Lorna Jowett and Huxley Bailey argue in this issue, the beating heart of the show, the focus of its identification for many, has always been Dean. Jowett and Bailey note that Dean performs an old-fashioned type of masculinity,

driven by his search for an absent father, and, as Halfyard argues, this is a key aspect of the series that is embedded in its very soul through the DNA of its musical soundscape.

Not only has the series survived for what is a remarkable length of time in the modern TV era, but it has remained resolutely true to itself throughout that time. This leads to the fact that not only the series, but also Sam and Dean, have been part of the lives of the viewers for such a long time, which is more than just a notable industrial feat. It also allows for the potential for significant personal resonance in the lives of the fans, and as we mentioned at the start of this introduction, *Supernatural* has marked the passage of, for our generation at least, the majority of our mature working lives. For us, we started watching *Supernatural* when our first dog, Max, was still an energetic two-year-old puppy. As the series draws to a close, he is a very old man of 17 who is mostly blind and rides in a buggy rather than walks. Yet he has been with us for every season, every episode, lying on the sofa, sitting on his chair looking out the window or, more recently, sleeping curled up in a comma on his blanket on the floor. It's not been the most important element of our lives together, far from it, but simply by being there and by being consistent *Supernatural* has marked what is, for us, an important passage of time, and there are countless fans with similar stories. As Will Dodson and Huxley Bailey outline in their exchange in this issue, the end of *Supernatural* marks the course of the bonding of their lives together as part of a blended family—an experience that is in keeping with the show's storylines and themes. Yet despite our love for the show, as alluded to above, one of the problems with the fact that *Supernatural* has remained true to its format for all this time is that it has not responded particularly well to changes in debates around representation. For Jowett the series' ending offers a chance to reflect upon how far TV has come since 2005 in terms of positive representation of a multitude of identity formations, and how *Supernatural*, for all its pleasures, has failed to keep up, prompting an exploration of the love/hate relationship she has with the show.

Ultimately, *Supernatural* is a horror TV series. In 2020 this makes it one of many such programmes that have come to populate our screens, produced for network and cable television as well as streaming providers. But in 2005, it stood apart from other programmes. As noted above, it was following in the tradition of established shows such as *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy* and *Angel* (as discussed by Abbott and Giannini and Woofter in this issue), but with a subtle difference. These earlier shows were hugely indebted to horror but in the 1990s and early 2000s horror on network television was relatively rare. To function on TV at this time, these shows were richly constructed generic hybrids that in many ways concealed, or

downplayed, their horror credentials behind more acceptable televisual genres such as soap opera, science fiction, teen drama and film noir, at least to television executives and advertisers if not the fans who seemed very clear about what they were watching (see Hills 2005, Jowett and Abbott 2013, Woofter and Jowett 2019 for a more detailed discussion of this genre hybridity). The other place where horror was overtly present on network television at this time was in the form of the increasingly graphic and gruesome forensic procedural series such as *CSI* and *CSI Miami*, which would wallow in the gore but also render it safe through science and police investigation (Jermyn 2007; Weissman 2007).

Supernatural marked a shift in television's attitude to horror. Like its predecessors, it is a hybrid series, in this case drawing upon the road movie and melodrama in terms of narrative structure and emotional and character trajectory. But above all else, with its tales of family dysfunction, vengeance, curses, monsters, and apocalypse, it is horror, overtly wearing its horror credentials on its sleeve. The show was the brainchild of Eric Kripke, who had previously written the screenplay to the film *Boogeyman* (2005), which by his own admission turned him from an unsuccessful comedy writer into a successful horror writer. He had an idea for a horror series about urban legends, which previously had failed to gain traction in Hollywood but "suddenly, the market was right for horror" (2007, 6). The show's horror pedigree is apparent from the start with the first season offering a checklist of monsters out of American folklore and global cinema, including a plethora of vengeful ghosts, demons, shapeshifters, pagan gods, wendigos, reapers, and vampires, as well as iconic urban legends such as the Hook Man and Bloody Mary. Its visual style in the first few seasons is particularly indebted to J-horror, with numerous long-haired female spirits flickering in and out of the image like Sadako from *Ringu* (1998). The show even featured the requisite backwoods human cannibals in a nod to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The X-Files*' "Home" (4.2) ("The Benders" 1.15). The series was executive produced by lead-director, and *X-Files* alumnus, Kim Manners, who directed seventeen episodes of *Supernatural* before his death in 2009. He brought a dark visual style and a rich horror palette to the show, as evidenced in such episodes as "Dead in the Water" (1.3), "Scarecrow" (1.11), "Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things" (2.4), "Heart" (2.17) and "Fresh Blood" (3.7). *Supernatural* regularly oscillates between graphic body horror ("The Third Man" 6.3), creature features ("Monster Movie" 4.5), and depictions of the uncanny ("Provenance" 1.19). This show has, throughout its run, never abandoned its love of horror, narratively or aesthetically and its increasingly stable place on the CW signals the growing acceptance of horror on mainstream television.

While *Supernatural* has been following its own narrative and generic trajectory, the landscape of horror on TV has undergone mammoth changes around it, the result of the expansion of digital television. The proliferation of cable channels and multimedia platforms and streaming services, encouraging greater competition, has increased the desirability of niche programmes that foster dedicated audiences. Horror fans are loyal and as such, the genre is now everywhere on television. *Supernatural* therefore marks a key pivot point, marking the transition between a hybrid horror and a form of TV horror that announces and overtly celebrates its generic standing. As such the landscape of TV horror has been building gradually and exponentially alongside *Supernatural's* fifteen-year run, through shows as diverse as *Masters of Horror* (2005-2007), *The Walking Dead* (2010-), *American Horror Story* (2011-), *Hannibal* (2013-2015), *Bates Motel* (2013-2018), *The Exorcist* (2016-18), *Castle Rock* (2018-), *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019-), *Creepshow* (2019-), *Lovecraft Country* (2020-), as well as a growing body of global horror series such as *Les revenants* (France 2012-2015), *Wolf Creek* (Australia 2016-17), *The Rain* (Denmark 2018-2020), *Kingdom* (South Korea 2019-), *The Grudge* (Japan 2020), and *Reality Z* (Brazil 2020-).

The proliferation of providers and multimedia platforms has also led to the relaxation of censorship on television, unleashing a much more graphic and confrontational depiction of the macabre, the violent and the uncanny. While *Supernatural's* place on the CW has meant it has faced more restrictions than programmes on other providers such as Netflix's *Hemlock Grove* (2013-2015) or the El Rey Network's *From Dusk Till Dawn* (2014-2016), it has clearly responded to this transition on television with Sam and Dean's more spectral disposal of ghosts (that often burst into flame and then disappear) or the exorcism of demons (causing the demon to exit the body in a cloud of black smoke) gradually superseded by more graphic depictions of violence with regular beheadings, stabbings, and bodily explosions. With the rise of cinematic torture horror in films such as *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005) and *Captivity* (2007), the series also saw an increased preoccupation with torture, particularly when Dean returns from hell as a master torturer in season four but also through Lucifer's torture of Sam both in the cage and after he escapes.

Significantly, as Stacey Abbott discusses in this issue, the series' preoccupation with the apocalypse in all of its forms not only prefigures series such as *The Walking Dead*, *In the Flesh* (2013-2014), and *Black Summer* (2019-), but taps into the spirit of uncertainty and change that has characterised 21st century culture. But as much as the show is embedded in the present, it also looks back to a history of horror, overtly acknowledging its debt to landmark TV series such as *The X-Files*, *Buffy*, and, as Erin Giannini and Kristopher Woofter demonstrate in their discussion of

“Scoobynatural” (13.6), *Scooby Doo, Where are you?* (1969-1970). This approach equally characterises episodes such as “Monster Movie” and “Ghostfacers” (3.13), which introduce classic monster movies and the found footage/reality TV formula into the *Supernatural* matrix. Finally, the series’ careful integration of horror and melodrama, negotiating familial dysfunction, loss and grief alongside a never-ending battle against monsters and human frailty, has opened the door to serialised horror shows such as *The Originals* (2013-2018), *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *The Exorcist*, *Diablero* (2018-) and *Lovecraft Country*. *Supernatural* therefore exists as a nexus point in TV horror, both influenced by, and influencing, its past and its present.

“And now the end is near”

And so, just as season five’s final episode “Swan Song” was originally conceived to be the series finale, but turned out not to be so, so too this introduction is considering the end of a series that is still going. It is only fitting, for in *Supernatural* the end is rarely, at least so far, the end. Sam and Dean have both died and then emerged again, as indeed have Bobby, Castiel, Lucifer, Mary, Charlie (everybody loves Charlie), Kevin, Gabriel, Rowena, Jack, Meg, Ruby, Eileen, Raphael and Ketch, and that’s just those we can remember off the top of our heads. Throughout its run *Supernatural*, both within its world and in its own industrial context, has cheated death, obsessed always with the end of everything, yet never allowing everything to end. At the time of writing, on August 16, 2020, it has been announced that Ackles and Padalecki are currently back in Vancouver, undergoing the mandated 14 day Covid-19 quarantine, in preparation for the resumption of shooting on the final episodes (Mohan 2020). It looks like the end has finally come, and Sam and Dean are about to go into battle for the last time. Or will they? We’ve been here before after all, more than once.

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