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***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,

Dr. Stacey Abbott is a Reader in Film and Television Studies at the University of Roehampton. She is the author of numerous articles and books on horror film and television, including *Celluloid Vampires* (2007), *Angel: TV Milestone* (2009), *Undead Apocalypse* (2016), and co-author, with Lorna Jowett, of *TV Horror* (2013). Her most recent publication is the BFI Classic on *Near Dark* (2020). A fan from the start, in 2012 she began her academic journey with *Supernatural* by co-editing, with David Lavery, *TV Goes to Hell: An Unofficial Road Map of Supernatural*. The journey continues...

Dr. Simon Brown is Associate Professor of Film and Television at Kingston University. He has published articles on numerous TV series, including *Alias*, *Dexter*, *Under the Dome*, *The X-Files* and, of course, *Supernatural*. He is the author of *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television* (University of Texas Press, 2018) and *Creepshow* (Auteur Press, 2019). He is currently writing a monograph on British horror author James Herbert. His patronus is a Chevy Impala.

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 Woofert demonstrate in their discussion of

“Scooby natural” (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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editors of *Monstrum* for offering a home to our *Supernatural* Virtual Symposium as well as for their flexibility and indulgence when our original timetable was impacted by Covid-19. Thank you to the contributors to this issue and to those who will grace the pages of Part 2. Stay safe everyone.

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“I got a Sam!” *Supernatural* as the CW’s Tentpole Series

Erin Giannini

While brand identity has become an increasingly important concern for networks over the past 20 years (see, for example, Jaramillio 2002 and Johnson 2007), it is not limited to this time period. The NBC network, in both the 1980s and 1990s, pitched itself as the home for comedy, with its “Must-See TV” brand emerging in the early 1990s. On the negative side, CBS, initially dubbed the “Tiffany Network” due to the high-quality programming it offered during William S. Paley’s (1928-1946) tenure as the head of network, later became known as the “Country Broadcasting System” because of its reliance on rural-themed programming such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), and *Green Acres* (1965-1971). All of these were cancelled in the early 1970s to make way for what they considered more socially relevant series, such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979), marking another brand shift. That the “rural” series were generally the highest rated ones on the network was less important to the network than the fact that they did not attract the right demographics (younger or affluent viewers) and tarnished the image they wanted to project. Given that the weight of demographics over ratings was only starting to be applied to programming nearly a decade later (e.g., Thompson 1997, Feuer et al 1985), CBS was in that respect ahead of its time.

Currently, the CW, which airs *Supernatural* in the United States, has adopted the tagline “Dare to Defy” (Figure 1), and the promotional video the network released in September of 2019 emphasized the ways in which the network, in one respect, defied one of the issues plaguing its progenitors; that

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is, the primarily white casts of series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), and *Roswell* (1999-2002).¹ This promo featured the numerous series led by people of colour, including *Roswell, New Mexico* (2019-),



Figure 1: The CW's new logo and tagline

Charmed (2018-), *All-American* (2018-), and *Black Lightning* (2018-), and was tied in with the channel's earlier "We Defy" initiative, announced in March of 2019, to "reinforce the network's commitment to inclusion and representation," paired with videos featuring each series' stars ("We Defy," CW Network).

In terms of the channel's brand identity, however, the sheer volume of shows on the network based on DC properties and known collectively as the "Arrowverse" (*Arrow* [2012-2020], *The Flash* [2014-], *Legends of Tomorrow* [2016-], *Batwoman* [2019-], *Black Lightning*, and *Supergirl* [2015-]) as well as Archie comics-inspired series such as *Riverdale* (2017-) and *Katy Keene* (2020-), would suggest its overarching brand is comics related. (Even the recently ended *iZombie's* [2015-2020] source material was a comic from the now-defunct DC Vertigo line.) *Supernatural* (2005-2020), however, the last series still on air whose initial home was the WB network, doesn't quite fit either mould. Aside from the obvious fact that the series does not feature "super" heroes (i.e., its heroes are un-enhanced)², *Supernatural* also is neither adapted from other source material (as are the "comics" shows, as well as *Jane the Virgin* [2014-2019], loosely based on the

¹ Given its setting in New Mexico, *Roswell's* lack of any significant Latinx or Indigenous characters (a single episode "River Dog" [1.7] was set on a reservation) throughout its three seasons seems particularly egregious, given that Indigenous people represented more than 50% of the state's population as of the 2000 census ("Census 2000 Data").

² That being said, the season 15 episode "The Heroes Journey" (15.10) introduced the idea that the brothers' skill and ability to maneuver difficult (and sometimes deadly) situations was itself enhanced by Chuck (aka, God) as the prime author of their existences.

telenovela *Juana la Virgen* [2002]) or a reboot of an earlier series (*Dynasty* [2017-]; *Charmed*, *Roswell*, *New Mexico*).³

Yet despite *Supernatural*'s seeming outlier status, several elements of the series combine to make *Supernatural* the “tentpole” series of the CW. While “tentpole” has generally referred to a series or film that, in essence, is popular and/or financially solvent enough to prop up lower-rated series, M. J. Clarke, in his analysis of transmedia television, defines them as “experimenting with alternative organization or/and creative forms...texts that expand entertainment properties across multiple platforms” (Clarke 2012: 1). *Supernatural*, and the way it plays with “traditional representations of time, space, and character” (Clarke 2008), its longevity, the volume of ancillary materials it produces, and its profitability, fits well into both these definitions of a tentpole text. Further, although it is outside the comics-based programming that still comprises the largest share of the CW's schedule, in terms of its tone, narrative, characterizations, and themes *Supernatural* embodies the overarching brand identity of the CW's programming across series and genres; that is, it “defied” expectations about both its stories and character as well as expectations about the show's survival. While it has never matched the gender and racial diversity of the other more recent series on the CW, this essay will show how *Supernatural*'s stability and willingness to take chances with characterization and structure provided the resources and space for other shows, and the channel itself, to take chances and support off-beat stories and morally grey protagonists.

“They’re pretty obscure”: *Supernatural* as Network Tentpole

Created from the merging of Warner Brothers (known as the WB) and the United Paramount Network (UPN)—both mini-networks that struggled to find footholds in the limited US broadcast band and replicate Fox's earlier success in challenging what was known as the “Big Three” (NBC, CBS, and ABC)—the CW solved at least one problem that plagued its progenitors: it no longer had to share channel space. For many of the smaller markets in the country, the limited band space meant that a single channel would carry WB and UPN programs on alternate nights, all but guaranteeing that neither could

³ *Supernatural* also still struggles with its portrayal of people of color, both in terms of characters and of presentation of legends, myths, and religions from other cultures. For analysis of these elements, see Leow 2016 and Coker 2020.

compete in terms of ratings.⁴ During the previous decade, the WB and UPN (owned by Viacom, which also owned CBS and other networks) also fought for the same viewing demographic (18-34 year-olds). By 2006, both Time Warner and Viacom agreed to merge, forming a single network (The CW) that would combine selected programming from both original networks (Carter 2006). *Supernatural* aired its first season on the WB, and was the only debut program from that year selected to make the transition. The more established series, such as *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007, 2016), *Seventh Heaven* (1996-2007), *Smallville* (2001-2011), *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012), and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007, 2019), either aired a final season on the newly established channel before being cancelled (*Veronica Mars*) elected to end (*Gilmore Girls*, *Seventh Heaven*) or were in the middle of (eventual) lengthy runs (*Smallville* ran for an additional five seasons on the CW; *One Tree Hill*, six seasons). Despite the advantages in terms of broadcast space, the combined studios, and the anchoring of established series and network on the schedule, both *Supernatural* and the CW struggled during their first years of existence.

For both network and series, the struggles of their first few years centred around establishing an identity. The CW committed to airing a combination of new programs (*Gossip Girl* [2007-2012], *The Vampire Diaries* [2009-2017]) and older holdovers from the WB (*One Tree Hill* [2003-2012], *Smallville* [2001-2011]); unfortunately, this meant that it lacked the brand coherence that the network currently enjoys. *Supernatural*'s first three seasons offered a mix of a larger season-long story arc with stand-alone episodes, similar to its generic predecessors such as *Angel* (1999-2004). Its working class, Midwestern protagonists, depictions of violence and gore, and creator Eric Kripke's insistence on a classic rock soundtrack made it an uncomfortable fit with, for example, the Upper East Side denizens of *Gossip Girl*, or the small-town melodramas of *One Tree Hill* and *The Vampire Diaries*.⁵ Further, it wasn't until the

⁴ This could be used to a network's advantage; when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, cancelled by the WB over a fight with Fox regarding licensing fees, UPN met Fox's demands and gave the series a guaranteed two seasons. In what could be viewed as a retaliatory move, the WB promos for *Buffy*'s fifth season finale (and final episode to air on the WB) called it a "series finale." For markets that aired WB programming on Tuesdays, it, in essence, was, as there were no venues at that time to watch the series except on broadcast.

⁵ Given Warner Brother's status as a record label as well as a studio, most of its series used Warner Brother's music, complete with a title card at the end of a broadcast episode indicating what music was featured and where to purchase it. Besides serving as cross-promotion, it also eliminated the lengthy rights process to procure music. Kripke, however, threatened to walk if he was forced to use their music, as he didn't feel that contemporary music was appropriate for their characterization (Bekakos 2008).

debut of its fourth season in 2008, which narratively brought together numerous series plot lines into an overarching arc around an apocalyptic battle between heaven and hell, that *Supernatural* landed on the same successful formula of eschatology and brotherly love/chosen family that not only informed the rest of the series, but had its genesis in earlier shows such as *Buffy* and *Angel*. These aspects, sometimes similarly combined, also had an effect on later shows on the CW itself. While it is easy to see *Supernatural*'s DNA in the dark storylines and vigilantism of *Arrow*, or the chosen family, grey morality, and semi-apocalyptic plots of *iZombie*, even a non-horror/action series such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* ((2015-2019) offers morally dubious characters and actions, a strong reliance on metatextual references and structures, and music to express characters' emotions. Indeed, it is one of the only CW series that puts music at the forefront as thoroughly as *Supernatural*.

From 2006-2011, however, the CW was either ranked fifth or sixth among broadcast viewers, with no series, including *Supernatural*, ever landing in the top tier of viewership. The 2007-2008 Writer's Strike resulted in network layoffs and the shuttering of their comedy development division (Hibberd 2008). While viewership continued to grow, particularly among women aged 18-34 years, there was continued talk that Warner Brothers and Viacom would terminate the network (Adalain 2008). Dawn Ostroff, brought over from UPN to serve as the network's president, shepherded the network through the transitional period (2006-2011), with Mark Pedowitz taking over in 2011. It was under Pedowitz's tenure that Greg Berlanti was brought in to develop *Arrow*, and later its numerous spin-offs, establishing a stable programming slate and identity.

Cancellation was also an ever-present threat for *Supernatural* during this same time period, although Kripke boldly ended seasons one, three and four on cliffhangers. (In two of these instances, its renewal was not guaranteed; season two wasn't renewed until May 18, 2006, and season four on March 4, 2008, long after production had shut down due to the strike.) While it did manage to make it to season five, Kripke announced on February 16, 2010 (the midpoint of season five) that he was electing not to renew his contract and would depart the series, which seemed to indicate that *Supernatural* would conclude with the aptly-named season finale, "Swan Song," which ends the battle between heaven and hell at the cost of Sam's life (5.22). Yet Kripke's announcement occurred simultaneously with the CW's decision to renew the series for a sixth season with new showrunner Sera Gamble (Ausiello 2010). By 2012 (end of season 7/start of season 8), the series consistently benefitted from an early renewal (in February instead May), meaning both cast and crew knew they'd be employed

going into pilot season, rather than having to scramble for work over the summer.

By the time of the series' end in 2020, it will consist of twice the number of seasons without its creator/showrunner as with him, suggesting its formula of family dynamics, apocalyptic storylines, and blend of stand-alone episodes feeding into a larger arc was already well enough established not to require Kripke's vision as a guide. It was only the second series on the CW to hit the former marker for syndication (100 episodes),⁶ going on to hit both 200 ("Fan Fiction" 10.4) and 300 ("Lebanon" 14.13) episodes in its tenth (2014) and fourteenth seasons (2018), respectively. Indeed, the start of its 11th season marked *Supernatural* as the longest-running prime-time genre series in US television history. While the CW gave the show opportunities to develop and grow; *Supernatural* did the same for the network itself. Its position as a stable entity on the schedule lead to a greater stability for the network. In that respect, it suggests that *Supernatural* offers a new programming paradigm that extends beyond the traditional (ratings, advertising, etc.) used to judge a programme's success.

"He's not a hunter, but he plays one on TV": *Supernatural* as Embodiment of Programming Shifts

Despite its remarkable run, *Supernatural's* position on a low-rated network with its own programming issues, as well as the costs of special effects and night-shooting, meant that its longevity was not assured.⁷ Until Mark Pedowitz—a strong advocate for the series—took over as network president in 2011, *Supernatural* was not safe from the ever-present threat of cancellation. A self-professed fan of the series before his time at the CW, Pedowitz recognized both the importance of *Supernatural's* deal with Netflix driving new viewership and its fans' presence on social media (Prudom 2016). His decision to pair *Supernatural's* eighth season (the first with new showrunner Jeremy Carver) with the debut of *Arrow* (2012-2020), moving it out of the "Friday Night Death Slot"

⁶ The first was another WB series brought over to the CW during the merger, *One Tree Hill*, which aired its 100th episode in 2008, two years prior to *Supernatural's* "Point of No Return," airing in 2010. Oddly enough, although dissimilar in genre and subject matter, both series focus on two brothers' relationship with one another.

⁷ The line quoted in this section's subheading is taken from "The French Mistake" (6.16).

it had occupied during Gamble's turn as showrunner, aided both series.⁸ Nor was this an anomaly; *Supernatural* had been paired with *The Vampire Diaries* for the latter's first season (2009; *Supernatural*'s fifth season). That combination was successful enough for Pedowitz to subsequently tie many of its debut shows to *Supernatural* (Prudom 2016), including the aforementioned *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Legacies* (2018-).⁹ The use of *Supernatural* to prop up other series is suggestive of its status as a tentpole series for the network.

Like the other shows on the network, *Supernatural* has never been a ratings powerhouse (averaging 1 to 2 million viewers from season 9 onwards), and yet it is possible to examine how, since its debut in 2005, it both embodies and benefits from the significant production, distribution, and rating shifts that have occurred during its run. It was the first WB series to have its pilot air online before broadcast; it was one of the first CW series to be available for sale on iTunes the day after broadcast (Adalian and Fritz 2006), as well as to be made available on Netflix. It is also the only CW series (both ended and airing) in regular syndication, with daily three- to four-episode blocks on US cable network TNT, thereby mixing contemporary and traditional distribution methods and thus signalling its place as a marker of television's changes over its 15 seasons. Added to this are exclusive deals with Hasbro for *Supernatural*-themed board games and Funko for action figures, meaning the series offers significant monetary value to the network.¹⁰ The combination of TV and streaming syndication deals, as well as ancillary products allows the series to, in essence, "protect" other shows that are lower-rated but critically acclaimed, including recently ended *Jane the Virgin* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which hold the distinction of being the first Golden-Globe winning series for either the CW or WB/UPN.

⁸ *Arrow*'s parallel dark tone and focus on vigilantism and revenge offered a similar packaging as the show's pairing with *Nikita* (2010-2013).

⁹ *Legends of Tomorrow*, which also films in Vancouver, offered a metatextual tribute to *Supernatural* in its season 5 episode "Zari Not Zari" (5.8) when the characters interrupt the series' filming and come across Sam and Dean's Impala.

¹⁰ There are doubts around the actual figures: Warner Brothers Studio claimed that *Supernatural* operated at a deficit throughout its run, prompting Eric Kripke to file suit (Gardner 2017). Nor was Kripke alone in this; Fox Studio also claimed that *Bones* (2005-2017), which ran for 12 seasons on their network, also operated at a loss; executive producer Barry Josephson—along with series stars Emily Deschanel and David Boreanaz, and author Kathy Reichs—also sued. While Kripke's lawsuit is still pending, the *Bones* lawsuit was resolved in favor of Josephson, et al (Gardner 2019).

Such protection has become increasingly vital in the current television climate. Starting with the passage of the Telecommunications Act in 1996, which relaxed the financial incentive and syndication rules—known colloquially as *fin-syn*—networks had less incentive to air programs not produced by their own studio. By producing and airing series produced in-house instead they would not have to negotiate or pay significant licensing fees to other studios. (Witness, for example, the fight between Twentieth Century Fox studios and Warner Brothers over the payment of licensing fees for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which led to its cancellation on the WB network [Goodman 2001].) With the exception of three current programs (*The Outpost* [2018-], *Pandora* [2019-], and *Burden of Proof* [2018-]), all of the CW's series over the past 5 years have been produced (or co-produced) by its parent companies CBS and/or Warner Brothers Studios. Foregoing both major licensing and pilot development costs, the CW renewed its entire slate of programming for the past 3 years, anchored by the now-expected renewal of *Supernatural*.¹¹

The stability of *Supernatural* on the schedule was echoed in the series' eighth season with the addition of a permanent "residence" for the characters. Unlike the earlier seasons, which more prominently featured the Impala, various hotel rooms, the Roadhouse (season 2) and Bobby Singer's [Jim Beaver] house (up to season 7), the addition of the Men of Letters' bunker added a stable set that did not require re-dressing from episode to episode ("Everybody Hates Hitler", 8.13). On a network level, a series as established as *Supernatural* allowed the network to take risks with other programs such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which spent four seasons not only deconstructing romantic comedy tropes but offered a nuanced portrayal of borderline personality disorder set to musical theatre-inspired songs nearly every episode, was unlike anything else on the network and frequently dived into taboo subjects (on US television), such as abortion ("When Will Josh and His Friend Leave Me Alone?" 2.4).

Conclusion: "What the hell is a Padalecki?" *Supernatural* as Narrative Tentpole

In these respects, *Supernatural* offered both an identity for the CW and the space for the network to take chances with content. The CW's "Dare to Defy" tagline

¹¹ Filming a drama pilot often has a base cost of at least \$5 million, although others can be significantly higher (eg, *Lost*'s [2004-2010] pilot episode cost between \$10 and 14 million [Ming 2018]).

is equally apt for a series that no one expected to last much beyond its first season; creator Kripke himself finds its unprecedented longevity “surreal” (McGinnis 2019). Indeed, for a series with such a relatively small ensemble, *Supernatural* has proven itself remarkably flexible in terms of character beats and plots, including “remixing” earlier stories (such as Dean’s decision to not serve as a vessel for the archangel Michael in season five (“Point of No Return” 5.18) with a different outcome. Yet on a narrative level, it also meets M.J. Clarke’s definition of a tentpole text, in that it was “streamable ... available for exploitation in other media, and modular ... composed of disintegrative narrative parts disconnected with regards to traditional representations of time, space, and character” (Clarke 2008). As indicated above, it not only produces significant ancillary material (an anime version of the first season (2011), the web series “Ghostfacers” (April 15-May 13, 2010) and board games/action figures, but also quickly adapted to the aforementioned production and distribution shifts. Indeed, it continues to gain new viewership through its availability on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon in the United Kingdom.



Figure 2: Dean’s reaction to the “Jared” and “Jensen” magazine cover.

Further, while the series followed a similar narrative trajectory to other contemporary or near-contemporary genre series (season and series-long arcs, character development, and narrative memory), *Supernatural* has frequently upended its own premise with a series of metafictional episodes. A significant

example of this is “The French Mistake” (6.15) in which Sam and Dean are thrust into an alternate reality in which they are the actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, who only “play” brothers Sam and Dean Winchester on a television show called *Supernatural* (Figure 2). While the series “reality” was re-established at the end of the episode, “The French Mistake” unspooled the “traditional” narrative more so than the other “meta” episodes by leaning into its basic unreality. It is a testament to the series’ importance to the network that it has so consistently managed to exist simultaneously as a “traditional” series—both narratively and from a production standpoint—and a text that consistently questions its own constructed nature, ancillary existence, and fandom. In this way, it embodies that disconnect by serving as a stable entity (like an older sibling) that allows the series around it to develop in their own ways. *Supernatural*’s stable position on the schedule while simultaneously taking risks with both its characters and narrative structure allows it to serve as a bulwark for other series and the channel itself to take chances with content and characterization.

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The (Long and Winding) Road So Far: *Supernatural*'s UK Broadcast

Simon Brown

Elsewhere in this special issue, Erin Giannini argues that over its fifteen-year run *Supernatural* has become a signature show for the CW, its home network in the United States. In 2006 *Supernatural* was one of only a handful of shows to transfer over from the WB to the CW and while it is not uncommon for networks or channels to either launch or rebrand around a high-profile attention-grabbing series (for instance FX with *The Shield* [2002-2008] or Showtime with *Dexter* [2006-2013], *Weeds* [2005-2012] and *Californication* [2007-2014], see Brown 2010a), the decision to move *Supernatural* to the new network does not appear to have been the result of any sense that the show somehow embodied what the CW would be. It was not the kind of “brand” show that, as Dermot Horan suggests, generates either large audiences or significant kudos for a network, nor makes an important statement about its ambitions (2007, 117). According to Karen Petruska, *Supernatural* was selected because it offered what Dawn Ostroff, President of UPN and then the CW, described as “flow,” a built-in following that would draw the viewers from the old network onto the CW. *Supernatural* made the cut because of its ongoing relationship to *Smallville* (2001-2011), its lead-in show on the WB. Just as viewers of the established *Smallville* tended to stay around to watch season 1 of *Supernatural*, the reasoning was that migrating both series over would offer an added attraction to those same viewers (2011, 223).

The decision to save *Supernatural* for the CW was therefore largely practical, and indeed, as Giannini notes, in its early years both the CW and *Supernatural* struggled to attract major audiences. However, as Petruska points out, what *Supernatural* did have in place of large numbers was remarkably consistent viewing figures, and the result of this was that by 2009 the show had achieved a measure of “genuine security,” which meant it was

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able to survive not only the departure of the showrunner Erik Kripke at the end of season 5 in 2010, but also the completion of his planned original story arc (Petruska 2011, 224). Even a dip in the ratings in season 6 did not have much of an impact, for in May 2011, as season 6 was ending, Mark Pedowitz took over as CW's President. A firm advocate for *Supernatural*, Pedowitz's tenure secured *Supernatural*'s indefinite future. It became regularly one of the first of the network's ongoing slate of programmes to be renewed, and when the announcement was made in March 2019 that season 15 was to be the last, Pedowitz was clear that while he supported the decision of the producers and stars, "if you could convince them to come back, I'm open" (Maglio 2019). Pedowitz's support didn't mean the CW didn't monkey around with the show's timeslot. The pilot aired on a Tuesday night and the first series maintained this Tuesday slot until moving to Thursday with "Hell House" (1.17) in March 2006. From that moment Thursday night became the show's established home until the end of season 5 in May 2010. After that the series ping-ponged around the CW schedule for several years, going from Fridays (season 6 and 7) to Wednesdays (season 8) to Tuesdays (season 9), to Tuesdays and Wednesdays (season 10) and to Wednesdays (season 11), before settling once more into its regular Thursday home (seasons 12-15).

This theme of home is embedded in the series itself. The final episode of season 5, "Swan Song" (5.22), originally conceived as the end of the entire show, begins with Chuck narrating the history of the iconic Chevy impala, which he describes as "the most important object in pretty much the whole universe." Chuck speaks of the importance to Sam and Dean of this perfectly average muscle car, with its plastic soldier wedged into the ashtray and its Lego bricks stuffed into the vents. He says "it never occurred to them that, sure, maybe they never had a roof and four walls, but they were never, in fact, homeless," and it is the memories associated with the car, with their home, that finally allows Sam to shake off Lucifer's control and sacrifice himself for Dean. Home implies stability and it implies family, both important elements in Sam's ability to wrest control of himself back from the devil, and in the context of the CW, the implications are similar. In spite of its occasionally erratic scheduling, over its lifetime *Supernatural* became a constant, regular fixture on the CW's televisual landscape, which in turn facilitated the kind of fandom and the wider *Supernatural* family that supported the series, and the network, in a reciprocal agreement. Dean takes care of the car, and the car takes care of Dean and Sam, just as the CW takes care of *Supernatural* and the fans take care of the CW. However, if *Supernatural*'s US run was defined by its consistency and stability, for UK viewers the experience of watching *Supernatural* has been quite the opposite—a near-chaotic instability—and by examining the troubled

broadcast of the show in Britain I want to highlight the importance of the CW's support, and of a stable home, to *Supernatural's* extraordinary resilience.

In keeping with its status now as the longest running genre TV show in history, the story of the UK broadcast of *Supernatural* is one of a very old-fashioned way of doing things. In 2020 UK viewers find themselves in a glorious post-television world where whole series of *Stranger Things* (2016-) or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-) can drop globally on the same day on Netflix, or flagship shows like *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) and *The Walking Dead* (FX, 2010-) are simulcast. Yet the fact that some series get such VIP treatment only serves to highlight the fact that there are still issues for other shows that suffer a much more precarious and, for the fans, highly frustrating trans-Atlantic existence. *Supernatural* is a case in point.

Supernatural's UK run began promisingly. It was picked up for broadcast by the free-to-air digital Channel ITV2 which, as Alison Peirse points out, had in its outlook a “distinct parity” with the CW and its aim of capturing a 16-34 largely female audience (2010, 263). In contrast to the CW, after acquiring *Supernatural* in 2005, ITV2 saw it as a significant brand product and went to great lengths to promote the show to its core viewership as a key part of a major re-launch of the channel (BBC 2007). Drawing upon the example of Channel Four's successful marketing campaign for the 2005 UK premiere of ABC's *Lost* (2004-2010, see Abbott 2009, 12-14), ITV2 commissioned a substantial promotional campaign with the tagline “Scary Just got Sexy.” The campaign featured TV and cinema ads with Sam and Dean staring moodily off into the distance whilst being groped by beautiful, demonic-looking women. The campaign effectively rebranded the series, known in the USA for its brooding masculine eye-candy but not so much for the kind of sweaty sexual tension suggested by the promos, which implied that Sam and Dean's “family business” involved fighting off predatory women rather than killing monsters.

ITV2's decision to fold *Supernatural* into its rebrand and re-launch is not unusual. As Janet McCabe argues, American series are often used in the UK to give a new channel an advantage over its rivals. For instance, when More4 began in October 2005, Channel Four shifted *The West Wing* (1999-2006) from E4 to its new digital channel to attract audiences (McCabe 2013, 27). As an attention-grabbing signature series for ITV2's relaunch, season 1 of *Supernatural* aired at 9pm on Sunday nights, repeated the next day at 11pm on ITV1. For the next four years ITV2 offered a stable 9pm Sunday night home for *Supernatural*. The Monday night repeat on ITV1 was dropped for season 2, and a brief flirtation with showing season 2 in its entirety on ITV1 after its run on ITV2 ended was abandoned half-way through the season. ITV2 was available for free to anyone, and each season aired in the UK within a short time of its US airing. Season 1 began in January 2006 for

example, while season 2 began in February 2007. Such minor delays were standard, allowing for the season to run weekly in the UK without the normal mid-season hiatus seen in the US and thus to finish almost simultaneously in both territories. There were some grumbles when viewers of season 2 suddenly found themselves facing an unexpected two-month gap between the airing of “Jus in Bello” (3.12) on 13 April, and “Ghostfacers” (3.13) on 8 June (Digital Spy, 2008). Season 3 however was impacted by the writers’ strike and in the USA there was a similar two-month gap between these episodes; so, while this delay was an irritant to some, the general consensus was that ITV2 was treating the show, and its fans, with respect. Little did they know that there was far, far worse to come.

In July 2009 the rights to *Supernatural* were poached from ITV2 by Virgin Media for their own Living TV channel, which had developed a reputation as “UK TV’s home of the paranormal” thanks to the phenomenal success of the ghost-hunting series *Most Haunted*, which had been airing since 2002 but the popularity of which was very much on the wane by 2009 (Elliott 2009). Living TV started season five promisingly by maintaining a similar timetable to ITV2, airing the first two episodes back to back at 9pm and 10pm on 10 February 2010, and then maintaining the same 9pm Wednesday night slot for the rest of the season. However, for fans of the show the big difference was that Living TV was not free to air and was only available to subscribers of either the Virgin digital or Sky satellite service. In 2009 Virgin had around 4 million subscribers, with Sky around 9 million (Virgin Media 2010, 10; Wray, 2009), considerably less than the at least 25 million households who in 2009 paid the licence fee (which anyone in the UK who has a TV set has to pay) and so had access to ITV2. Virgin took on *Supernatural* towards the end of a long-running feud with BskyB, which in 2007 had seen Virgin drop a number of key Sky Channels from its package. This prompted Sky to respond with a campaign aimed at fans of US television to switch from Virgin to Sky in order to retain access to key shows like *Lost* and *24* (2001-2010). Such tactics were largely over by 2009 as the two primary deliverers of UK subscription television began to work cautiously together, finally signing an agreement in June 2010 which saw BskyB purchase Virgin Media Television, including Living TV, while Virgin acquired long term access to the then premium Sky channels (Deans 2010).

Sky rebranded Living TV as Sky Living in October 2010 and it was under the Sky Living banner that UK *Supernatural* fans really began to suffer. This is ironic given that Sky had a long-standing and, as previously mentioned, often predatory relationship with US TV. In the 1990s for instance Sky broadcast *The X-Files* (1993-2002) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) a full 8 months before they appeared on terrestrial TV, and 2011 saw the launch of Sky Atlantic. This was a premium Sky channel (meaning

that only Sky subscribers could get it) billed as the UK home of HBO, and it launched with two new HBO series, *Boardwalk Empire* (2009-2014) and *Treme* (2010-2013) and, in another example of predatory poaching, the fifth season of *Mad Men* (2007-2015) which promptly disappeared from its home on the free-to-air BBC. Taking the decision to run *Supernatural* in the summer rather than the spring slot it had enjoyed on ITV2 and Living TV, Sky Living did not begin season 6 until June 2011, a nine month delay from the US run, while season 7 began in August 2012, 11 months after the US, and season 8 in July 2013, another nine month delay.

Season 8 ended on Sky Living just before Christmas 2013, and in March 2014 Sky Living announced that it would not be picking up the ninth season, which at that point was already on the air in the US, and which fans could reasonably assume would be starting in the UK in the summer. No reason was given for the decision, and unlike the move from ITV2, there was no announcement that the rights had been purchased elsewhere. For the entirety of 2014 in Britain, *Supernatural* was off the air, prompting the formation of a campaign to save *Supernatural* in the UK. Flyers were handed out at UK conventions; fans were asked to post selfies on Twitter holding signs featuring the hashtag #UKNeedsSPN; a petition was launched on change.org; and an attempt was made between the 28 July and 3 August to get as many fans as possible to download Kansas' iconic "Carry on Wayward Son" to try to get the song to No. 1 in the charts.

While the campaign attracted modest support, with only 855 signatories to the petition for example, and Kansas' signature tune not making the top spot, it did nevertheless show there was die-hard support for the series in Britain, and out of the blue in December 2014, it was announced that season 9 was returning to free-to-air TV when it was picked up by E4. Launched in 2001, E4, like the CW and Living TV, was aimed at a 16-24 year old demographic, and indeed describes itself on Twitter as the "naughty, younger sibling of Channel 4." Fans may have breathed a sigh of relief as *Supernatural* returned to UK terrestrial screens in January 2015, given a decent slot at 10pm on Wednesday night with the first episode following the premiere of season 2 of E4's established SF show *The 100* (2014-2020), but this was nevertheless a full fifteen months and a season and a half behind the US. For *Supernatural* fans of a certain age, this was like a return to the bad old days of cult tv viewing in the UK. As I've argued elsewhere, fans of *The X-Files* in the 1990s—most of whom relied upon the terrestrial broadcast rather than Sky, which was still relatively small in terms of subscribers—were used to watching their favourite show a year, and a full season, behind their American counterparts (Brown 2010b, 164-165). But in the 2000s the increasing take-up of satellite and cable services, alongside the aforementioned use of popular shows like *Lost*, *24* and *Mad Men* as

bargaining chips to encourage new subscribers, had seen such delays become less commonplace. There was therefore some hope that E4 would broadcast *Supernatural* in such a way as to shorten that gap, and this they did, although it was a long time coming. Season 10 began in October 2015, the same month that season 11 began on the CW, and then E4 broadcast season 11 hot on the heels of the end of season 10 in April 2016, shortening the delay to six months and then three months for season 12, which began in January 2017.

Finally, for the first time in seven years since season 4 aired on ITV2 in 2010, *Supernatural* was on free-to-air TV only three months later than its US broadcast. This was short lived, however, as season 13 began on E4 in April 2018, a return to the longer delays which saw the rot set in on Sky Living. Then after the end of season 13 aired in September 2018, *Supernatural* simply never reappeared on E4's schedule. No reason was given, and repeated attempts by fans to find out E4's plans for the show were met with silence. This prompted another petition on change.org when the end of show was announced in March 2019 in order to persuade E4 to air the final two seasons. The broadcast of Season 14 was finally announced by E4 on 18 March 2020, a mere week and a half before it actually began on Sunday 29 March 2020 at 10pm, with each episode also dropping on Amazon Prime at the same time, for those who would elect to pay for it rather than watch it for free. Two weeks later, disappointed with the viewing figures, E4 moved it to midnight, replacing it at the 10pm slot with back to back repeats of the nude dating show *Naked Attraction* (2016-). Shortly after, it was shifted again to 1am. In practical terms this means very little in the contemporary TV landscape, given the ease by which one can now record a show on a PVR or set-top box, or watch it via catch-up. However, considering the UK does not have the same tradition of late-night television viewing as the USA, midnight or 1am on Sunday is about as much of a television death slot as it is possible to find in Britain. The move therefore is not only a clear signal of E4's lack of faith in *Supernatural* (as if such a signal were needed given what had gone before), but what it also does is deny UK the opportunity to share the experience of watching the show live with a like-minded fan community, via Twitter for instance. Indeed, as a backlash, E4's move has prompted a Twitter campaign among UK fans, led by @SPNisSavedintheUK and @valgreen660 to ignore the broadcast and watch each episode together on Monday evening instead. Although E4 announced in January 2020 that they had picked up the rights to season 15, the press release only stated it would air "at a later date" (Munn 2020) and the very fast decision to shift season 14 to a Sunday night death slot in favour of *Naked Attraction* does not sound encouraging for UK fans.

Such a situation epitomises the experience of watching *Supernatural* in UK. Far from being a tentpole product protected from on high and a reliable fixture of the schedule, the experience of watching the series in the UK is tantamount to a form of resistance, a battle by fans against the broadcasters to not only get the show on the air, but to enjoy it as a community. And there certainly is a thriving *Supernatural* fan community in the UK, with for instance regular fan conventions taking place organised by the likes of Starfury (Cross Roads), Rogue Events (Asylum) and, in 2018, Creation Entertainment, which runs the unofficial “official” *Supernatural* convention in the USA, hosted by Richard Speight Jr.

In America, despite being moved to the CW on *Smallville*’s coattails *Supernatural*’s constant and reliable presence gradually and quietly shifted it to the centre of the CW’s evolving brand, eventually bestowing upon the series the standing of a kind of beloved elder statesman. In contrast, despite beginning much more auspiciously as a signature show for ITV2, and then as a branded spooky product for Living TV, subsequent moves to Sky Living and then E4 have gradually robbed the series of its status, to the point where it has been replaced by the ultimate TV barrel-scraper, a naked dating show. Like the Impala, and later the Men of Letters bunker (although let’s face it, the bunker was never a substitute for the romance of the Chevy and the open road), the CW created a stable, if sometimes mobile, space in which a family could grow, come together and flourish. It seems that to an extent British TV had learned this lesson with events like the simulcasting of the final season of *Game of Thrones* on Sky Atlantic and the regular Monday night 9pm slot for *The Walking Dead* on Fox, the latter followed by the popular fan-facing Aftershow *The Talking Dead* (2011-). In doing so it seemed to be leaving far behind the bad old days of the 1990s when fans waited over a year for BBC1 to broadcast most of season 3 of *The X-Files* out of order with little regard for the integrity of the show. So for instance British viewers could wonder how Scully’s dog Queequeg could get eaten by an alligator in “Quagmire” (3.22) only to turn up again in a subsequent episode.¹ Yet while it is true to say that *Supernatural* has at least been shown in the UK the right way round, its nomadic and precarious existence has proved deeply frustrating for UK fans as they have undergone delays, unexpected transitions to subscription services, long periods of uncertainty, and finally what can only be described as outright contempt for the show they love, a fate that is by no means exclusive to *Supernatural*. In the USA, as Chuck quite rightly says, the quiet power of the Winchesters in their fifteen-year fight

¹ Queequeg appeared in three episodes in Season 3, “Clyde Bruckman’s Final Repose” (3.4), “War of the Coprophages” (3.12) and “Quagmire” (3.22). The BBC aired “Bruckman” on 3 October 1996, “Quagmire” on 20 November and “Coprophages” on 9 January 1997. Much of the rest of season 3 was similarly out of sequence.

against angels, demons, leviathan, lucifer and finally Chuck himself, was that they were never, in fact, homeless. In the UK the same cannot be said, and the *Supernatural* family has suffered for it.

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***Supernatural* and the Apocalypse: Observations from the Bunker**

Stacey Abbott

“God threw one last apocalypse at us and we beat it.”

— Dean, “The Rupture” (15.3)

Writing about *Supernatural* and the apocalypse from amidst lockdown during the global pandemic of 2020 seems to be appropriate and an entirely Winchester thing to do. Years of watching horror film and TV have been ideal preparation for a global pandemic, and the retreat into social isolation that characterised lockdown seems in keeping with the Winchesters. As I write, I imagine myself holed up in the Bunker, researching the apocalypse and all manner of horrors, which is not too far from the truth. I am, after all, a Woman of Letters.

2020 has witnessed the globe bombarded by ecological disasters, sickness, intolerance, racism, violence and horror. None of these individually are new but the twenty-first century has been marked by a growing culture of apocalypse that seems to have hit a peak during the pandemic. As events have unfolded in quick, and sometimes surreal, succession, anxiety, anger, and frustration levels have been brought to a peak, enhanced by twenty-four-hour news and social media. The world weariness surrounding the scale of the problems facing the globe calls to mind the exchange between Sam and Dean in “Two Minutes to Midnight” (5.21) as they prepare for their next set of missions in the battle to avert the apocalypse:

Dean: Good luck stopping the whole zombie apocalypse.

Sam: Yeah—good luck killing Death.

Dean: Yeah.

Sam: Remember when we used to just hunt Wendigos? How simple things were?

Dean: Not really.

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It is difficult to remember when things were simpler and, in fact, they never were. I find that as I reflect on the events of 2020, while also anticipating the end of *Supernatural*, my mind repeatedly turns to notions, approaches and understandings of apocalypse. While the Apocalypse, drawn from Revelations, suggests the end of everything, James Berger argues that there is a second meaning of apocalypse, which refers to “catastrophes that resemble the final ending” as they mark an end to something, often a way of living or understanding the world, representing a break or fissure that “separat[es] what came before from what came after” (1999, 5). It is this understanding of the apocalypse that underpins most dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature, film and television. For there to be a *post*-apocalypse then something must come after.

Supernatural merges Revelations’ conception of an ending to everything with this more secular approach to apocalypse. This essay will, therefore, examine how *Supernatural* has been shaped by global events and an evolving cultural conception of the apocalypse as the world has leapt from one cataclysm to the next over the fifteen years that the show has been on the air. In turn, it will consider what *Supernatural* has taught us about facing the apocalypse(s) and how to confront and channel our anxieties and despair into action. As 2020 continues to bring forth new challenges, what have we learned from Sam and Dean?

Coming on the air in 2005, two years after the final season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and one year after *Angel*’s conclusion (1999-2004), *Supernatural* seems to be their natural successor. This is in part because, like Buffy and Angel, Sam and Dean are the Chosen ones, Champions destined to protect humanity from all manner of monsters. It is also because, as with *Buffy* and *Angel*, *Supernatural* is preoccupied with the apocalypse in its many forms. On *Buffy*, each seasonal narrative involved the slayer staving off the Big Bad’s master plan to end the world. In contrast, on *Angel*, Angel and his team realise that the apocalypse isn’t a master plan “announced with a gong” (“Underneath” 5.17) but is a slow and insidious attack on humanity’s good will that must be countered by a team of Champions “living as if the world were as it should be to show it what it can be” (“Deep Down” 4.1). The work of saving the world never ends. *Supernatural* seems to be a composite of these two approaches as Sam and Dean are confronted by a veritable lexicon of apocalyptic imagery, through which, as Eve Bennett notes, the show taps into a cultural climate that has characterised twenty-first century television:

While world destruction and the annihilation of the human race have habitually existed as threats in the science fiction and fantasy genres, on television as well as in other media, in the past they typically

remained as such: threats, posed by villains whose plans would be thwarted by the heroes at the end of the episode or season. In the early twenty-first-century wave of American apocalyptic programmes, however, the threat is far more concrete (2019, 1).

While Lucifer, the Leviathan, the Darkness, and even God have their master plans to bring about the end of humanity which operate on seasonal arcs, Sam and Dean are also regularly confronted by other markers of the apocalypse—biblical, viral, ecological and corporate—which slowly chip away at their strength of will and against which they must constantly fight. These threats are more concrete, relentless, and decidedly familiar.

The most obvious example of the type of cataclysmic event described by Berger that has made its mark on *Supernatural* was the terrorist attack on the United States on 9/11 2001. The show began production only a few years into the wake of these events, causing, as Bennett argues, *Supernatural* to be embroiled in discourses surrounding 9/11 and masculinity (2019). In particular, the series reshapes the biblical conception of the Apocalypse from Revelations, which unfolds from seasons 3 to 5, in the light of the Iraq War and the War on Terror, both of which were a direct response to the events of 9/11. For instance, in “Good God, Y’All!” (5.2), Sam and Dean are called to a small Colorado town that is supposedly overrun by demons. When they arrive, the place looks like an abandoned battlefield; devoid of people but with cars overturned and blood on the streets. Trying to find an explanation for what has transpired, Dean is told about recent biblical omens, such as a river becoming polluted and a comet flying overhead, that signal the coming of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This is confirmed when Dean consults Revelations, causing the local priest to query ‘Are you saying that this is about THE Apocalypse? ... Wait back up, it’s the Apocalypse?’ As the episode progresses, however, THE Apocalypse becomes increasingly intertwined with more earthbound recognisable conceptions of war. While initially the lines between human and demon seem clear, when Sam is captured by a group of supposedly possessed people, he realises that they are not possessed but instead think that he is the demon. It is revealed that War, one of The Four Horsemen, has tricked everyone in the town into seeing the other side as the monsters—the other—fuelling paranoia and prejudice so they try to destroy each other. He tells Sam that there aren’t any demons in town, “just frightened people, ripping each other’s throats out. ... Last week this was Mayberry, this week they’re stabbing each other’s children.” War alludes to his presence at conflicts in Europe and the Middle East and while he does not mention Iraq specifically, the connection is made clear by the presence of a former marine, who informs Dean that he did two tours in Fallujah. The episode also alludes to torture when Sam is tied up in

a chair by fellow hunters Rufus and Jo who, believing he is possessed, repeatedly douse him in holy water to make him talk, suggestive of the kind of torture associated with the War on Terror and the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. By conveying how each side in this battle mistakenly see the other as the monster, the series challenges seeming clear cut distinctions between good and bad, Heaven and Hell, by highlighting the fragile distinctions between “them” and “us” during war. It also signals, as indeed did the aftermath of 9/11, how fragile “normal” society is and how quickly it can disintegrate when the seeds of fear and distrust are sown. As Linnie Blake argues, on *Supernatural* the lines between hunter and demons are blurred to illustrate how “the non-American other has been made monstrous in the wake of 9/11,” revealing “the monstrosity that has been seen to lie, since Abu Graib at least, in the hearts of Americans themselves” (2015, 232). As a result, the Apocalypse narrative of the series begins with a biblical conflict between Heaven and Hell that is progressively presented as a questionable religious war, an ideological battle in which each side believes absolutely in their righteousness, regardless of whose lives are destroyed in the crossfire.

Alongside this reimagining of a biblical apocalypse, the series plays with other types of imagery, most notably the zombie and its many different cultural interpretations. Zombies are a recurring device on *Supernatural* that surfaces in different forms to suit a range of narrative threads. Some are small isolated cases designed to explore episodic themes such as obsession and revenge (“Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things” 2.4) or grief and loss (“Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid” 5.15), but all connected to the series’ broader focus on family and free will.¹ In other cases, the show taps into the generic legacy of the zombie apocalypse narrative that was experiencing a resurgence in the early 21st century with films such as *Resident Evil* (2002), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). While many critics have linked this generic revival to 9/11 (see Briefel 2012; Wetmore 2012), I have argued elsewhere that to focus on 9/11 is limiting and ignores broader cultural anxieties and traumas (Abbott 2016, 74-91). *Supernatural*’s engagement with the zombie apocalypse narrative fuses together many of these elements. For instance, in “Croatoan” (2.9), Sam and Dean visit a small town to find that the locals seem to be infected by a virus that causes them to become violent and homicidal. While the title of the episode refers to the sixteenth-century mystery surrounding the Lost Colony of Roanoke, the episode’s siege narrative, violent infected people, medical explanation and mise-en-scène is suggestive of twenty-first century zombie apocalypse narratives. After a series of unexplained acts of violence, a local doctor examines the blood of one of the aggressors under a microscope and notes the presence of a virus

¹ For a more detailed discussion of these episodic narratives on *Supernatural* see Abbott 2016, 101-103.

along with a residue of sulphur, indicating to Sam and Dean that the virus is demonic rather than natural in origin. This medical mise-en-scène is in keeping with *I Am Legend* (2007), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Mutants* (2008), *World War Z* (2013), and *iZombie* (2015-2019), while the viral explanation conforms to *28 Days Later*'s conception of the zombie outbreak as explained by survivor Selena:

It started as rioting. Right from the beginning you knew this was different—because it was happening in small villages, market towns. Then it wasn't on the TV anymore. It was in the street outside—it was coming through your windows. It was a virus, infection. You didn't need a doctor to tell you that. It's the blood—or something in the blood.

The Croatoan virus emerged in a small town; is located in the blood; and is transmitted through exposure. While initially appearing to be a monster-of-the-week narrative in which the infected suddenly disappear at the episode's end like the original colony of Roanoke, a coda to the episode reveals that this is part of an unknown demonic experiment and the medical mise-en-scène of the episode hints at the apocalyptic events to come.

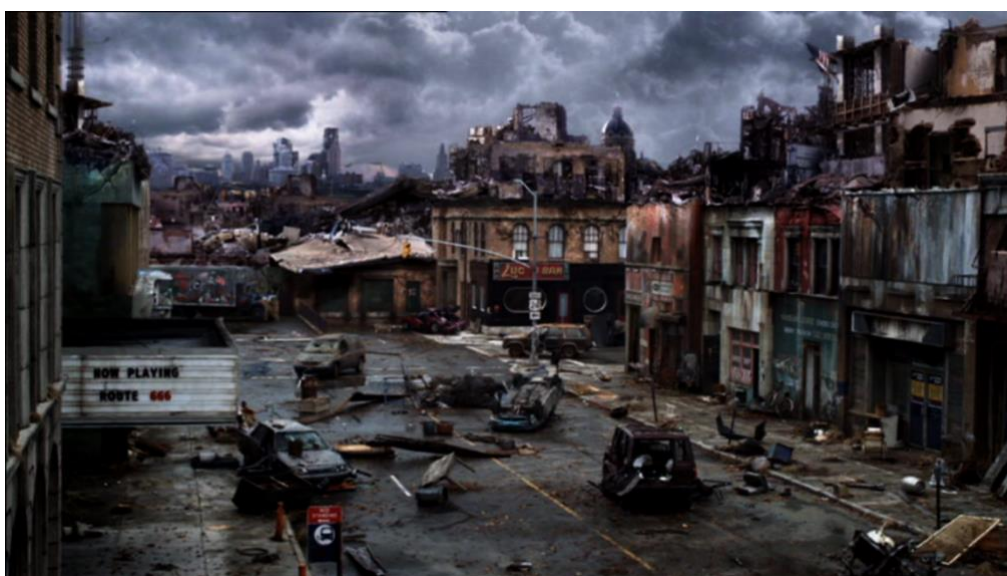


Figure 1: A post-apocalyptic landscape in "The End."

The zombie narrative introduced in "Croatoan" integrates with the overarching biblical narrative in "The End" (5.4), when the Angel Zacharia offers Dean a glimpse of what will happen if he does not play his part in the battle between Heaven and Hell by sending him five years into his future.

Dean wakes up, like Jim in *28 Days Later* and Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead* (2010-), in a post-apocalyptic landscape (Figure 1). The city is empty of life, the buildings have been bombed, cars have been torched, and the streets are filled with debris and decay. Unclear as to what has transpired, Dean finds a young child crouching over a teddy bear and when he approaches to help her, he suddenly sees blood dripping from her mouth as she turns and violently attacks him. This scene is notably similar to the opening of the television series *The Walking Dead* (“Days Gone By” 1.1), including the child and teddy bear and Dean and Rick both calling out “little girl” as they approach the zombie-child (Figures 2 and 3).²



Figures 2 and 3: Dean and the zombie child in “The End” (top); Rick Grimes and the zombie child in “Days Gone By” *The Walking Dead* (1.1) (bottom).

² “The End” was first broadcast on 1 October 2009 and “Days Gone By” was first broadcast on 31 October 2010.

Both owe a debt to Karen in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) who murders and eats her parents and, arguably, Vivian the zombie-child in Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*, whose emergence from the shadows wearing a bloody nightgown and bite marks on her face similarly marks the protagonist's first confrontation with a zombie (Figures 4 and 5). "The End" therefore positions *Supernatural* within an extensive tradition of zombie apocalypse narratives. After Dean knocks the little girl down, he sees the word Croatoan graffitied on the wall just as a large group of infected adults turn up and chase him through the city, linking the pre-apocalypse experiment of "Croatoan" with this post-apocalypse vision. Dean may have gone to sleep in a world preparing for a holy war, but he woke up in a zombie apocalypse in which humanity is destroyed or transformed through viral infection.



Figures 4 and 5: The zombie children in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (top) and the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (bottom).

The lexicon of catastrophic imagery continues in "Hammer of the Gods" (5.19), with a threat that seems even more concrete and familiar. As

Sam and Dean realise that to stop Lucifer they need to find the two remaining Horsemen of the Apocalypse—Pestilence and Death—the episode cuts away to an older man, suffering from flu, as he enters a gas station convenience store. His skin is blotchy, suggesting fever, and he has a dripping red nose (Figure 6). As he moves through the store, he repeatedly sneezes and leaves a trail of mucus over everything he touches. A newspaper is glimpsed in the scene with a headline declaring that a new strain of flu is spreading across the USA. The flies that collect around this man signal that he is Pestilence and that his contribution to the coming Armageddon is in the form of a pandemic.



Figure 6: The flu pandemic in “Hammer of the Gods” 5.19.

This pandemic imagery continues in “The Devil You Know” (5.20) when Sam and Dean visit a hospital to investigate the quickly spreading flu that has seen 70 cases emerge in 24 hours. The hospital is filled with people, including the gas station attendant, displaying flu symptoms, while the doctors and Sam and Dean wear face masks. Sam and Dean suspect the Croatoan virus but are informed it is a mild form of swine flu, referring to the pandemic of 2009 but now possessing a heightened contemporary resonance. What initially was perceived by Sam and Dean as a comparatively mundane form of apocalypse—the flu—is now notably triggering. The imagery of a crowded hospital, the quick spread of the virus, Sam and Dean in face masks is evocative of the global impact of Covid-19.

The penultimate episode of season 5, “Two Minutes to Midnight”—a title which refers to the Doomsday clock and thus draws connections between the Cold War, the narrative’s battle between heaven and hell, and the contemporaneous War on Terror—weaves together this apocalyptic

imagery, while introducing new elements. The episode begins with Pestilence, posing as a doctor in a care home—imagery that once again has contemporary relevance in the light of the Coronavirus pandemic—who reveals that he is using the home and its patients as a lab to experiment with the viruses with which he will infect the country. While initially, Sam and Dean do not understand the purpose of spreading a treatable form of the flu, they eventually discover that the demonic plan is to mask the Croatoan virus as a flu vaccine. This will facilitate a quick and efficient spread of the zombie infection, thus throwing the country into the zombie apocalypse that Dean witnessed in “The End.”³ Sam, along with Bobby and Castiel, must fight off a group of workers infected with Croatoan in order to stop the shipment of the vaccine around the country.

At the same time, the brothers discover that Death—the last of the Four Horsemen—is planning to unleash the “storm of the millennium on Chicago,” which will destroy the city and set off a “chain of natural disasters,” thus introducing an ecological thread to the Apocalypse alongside global pandemic. When Dean prepares to stop Death, he finds the Horseman enjoying pizza in a local Chicago pizzeria. The violent storm imagery that can be seen through the windows shows the type of extreme weather that is increasingly associated with environmental disaster and climate change. This episode draws the biblical, viral, and ecological apocalyptic threads together in a cacophony of imagery and anxieties that continue to pre-occupy twenty-first century culture. Following season 5, as the globe has become increasingly preoccupied by climate change, *Supernatural* returned to more ecological apocalypse imagery in later episodes, starting with “All Along the Watchtower” (12.23). This episode introduces an alternate universe—Apocalypse world, which becomes central to season 13. In this world, Sam and Dean were never born and as a result the battle between Heaven and Hell took place, Lucifer lost, and the earth was laid waste by the Angels. The earth is scorched, the air is filled with dust, the landscape is grey, the trees and plants are dead, and the sky is filled with clouds and lightening. While the cause is biblical, the depiction of this universe is suggestive of nuclear or ecological disaster.

Finally, responding to the economic crisis of 2007-8, seasons six and seven (broadcast in 2010-11, 2011-12 respectively), introduced the notion of

³ This demonic plot is reminiscent of *I Am Legend* (2007) where the “Krippin virus” was a genetically rewritten form of measles virus engineered to cure cancer but subsequently mutated, killing 90% of the population and turning the remaining 10% into zombie-like creatures. Ironically, current developments for a Covid-19 vaccine suggest a similar approach “by using a harmless virus as a kind of Trojan horse to carry the genetic material of a pathogen into cells to generate an immune response” (Baker 2020). Let’s hope it has better results.

an economically-driven apocalypse. This is first introduced in “The Third Man” (6.3). While the battle between Heaven and Hell was circumvented, skirmishes for power continue with a pending civil war building in Heaven, which threatens a trail of disaster for humanity. At the same time, Sam and Dean investigate the suspicious deaths of three corrupt police officers in Pennsylvania, who shot a young black man and then covered up the crime by planting a gun to support their case for justifiable homicide. Each of these deaths is localised and violently abject. The first melts into a puddle of skin and *blood*; the second’s body becomes covered in *boils*; and the third’s brain and skull are eaten from the inside by *locusts*; channelling each the plagues of Egypt respectively. What begins as looking like Biblical vengeance against the police officers is eventually revealed to be the result of an economic transaction. The angel Balthazar—escaped from Heaven with stolen artefacts—has sold the staff of Moses to the victim’s younger brother in exchange for his soul, thus exploiting a very real and all-too-familiar crime against a young black man for profit. The politics around race and the economy are evoked through Balthazar, presented as a white arms dealer profiting from injustice against the black community.

When asked why he is collecting souls, Balthazar explains “In this economy? It is probably the only thing worth buying. Do you have any idea what souls are worth? What power they hold?” Souls are reframed from something precious and spiritual to a commodity for exchange—a factor touched on in previous seasons through the presence of Crossroads demons like Crowley, but here signalling the ubiquity of commodity culture through its adoption by the Angels: first Balthazar and then Castiel. It is eventually revealed that Castiel is similarly collecting souls, of humans and monsters, in order to accumulate enough power to win the heavenly civil war. As such the series explores the economic apocalypse through the increasing commodification of souls. The reframing of the apocalypse from the biblical to the capitalist, is further developed in season seven, which introduces the Leviathan, ancient monsters accidentally released from purgatory by Castiel in his bid for power. When Castiel is unable to contain them, they escape, mask themselves as humans, and infiltrate Corporate America. Their grand plan is to subjugate the human population through the production of fast food filled with addictive additives that render consumers passive, thus preparing humanity to be farmed and consumed. Erin Giannini equates the Leviathan-narrative to the economic crisis of 2007-8, describing the Leviathan as a corporate villain that is embodied in a “small group (1% if you will) living off of, and eventually devouring, the rest (99%)” (2014, 84). Rather than demons, angels, or zombies, Sam and Dean must confront corporate monsters who literally feed off the masses and whose rapacious

hunger and self-interest is visualised in the Leviathan's transformation into a giant, gaping maw.

All these examples illustrate how *Supernatural* presents a landscape through which Sam and Dean must repeatedly face and come to terms with the numerous threats that have come to characterise twenty-first century living—war, pandemic, climate change, economic crisis. It embodies in its narrative framework the relentless nature of the apocalypse, not starting with a gong but chipping away at our will to keep fighting. While often seemingly outmatched or overwhelmed by more powerful forces, Sam and Dean repeatedly resist these forces by insisting on controlling their own actions—saying no to being Michael's vessel, refusing to kill Lucifer's son Jack, resisting God's games and promises. Over the years their choices have contributed to their complicity in global events and catastrophes, but they also take responsibility and ownership of their actions, choosing not to succumb to the nihilism of these events but to resist and carry on fighting. The apocalypse is so familiar as a recurring trope in the show, that in "Back and to the Future" (15.1) Dean questions the value in the family business, hunting things and saving people, "just so he [Chuck/God] could throw another end of the world at us and then sit back and chug popcorn?" to which Sam responds, "Yes, well what's one more apocalypse, right?" For a show that is known for its meta narratives, Chuck/God is as much a stand in for the audience, sitting back and looking to be entertained, as he is for the creators of the show, trotting out yet another apocalypse for their delectation (Garcia 2011, 146-160; Macklem and Grace 2020). But the way in which Sam and Dean keep fighting is also a lesson in the work that is involved in saving the world, calling to mind Angel's final words in the *Angel* season finale "Not Fade Away" (5.22). As his team face a legion of demons from hell, Angel steps forward with his sword in hand, declaring, "Let's go to work," as he lashes out and the scene cuts to black. Arriving on television—on the WB, the same network as *Angel*—a year later, Sam and Dean have picked up Angel's sword and gone to *work*, saving the world, *a lot*.

Supernatural was scheduled to come to an end in May 2020 but the production was suspended on account of the Coronavirus pandemic. In an interview in which Padalecki assured fans that the production team and cast were committed to returning to complete the series and the Winchester's journey as soon as it is possible, he also acknowledged the similarity between global events and the plots of *Supernatural*, noting that the pandemic could have been one of their storylines (quoted by Adam Tamswell 2020, 14). As I have shown, however, it has, in fact, been a major thread to their narrative from the start. While fans anxiously await the broadcast of the final episodes, it somehow seems appropriate that the end of *Supernatural* has been delayed

on account of apocalypse. The final season has teased audiences with possible endings, offering glimpses of bleak conclusions involving Sam and Dean killing each other (“Atomic Monsters” 15.4) or the earth descended into a monster’s playground (“Galaxy Brain” 15.12), but the name of the title of the final episode—“Carry On” (15.20)—suggests a more hopeful conclusion. The work of saving the world is slow and extended but while Sam and Dean are out there fighting the good fight, there continues to be hope. Perhaps that is the message that *Supernatural* offers in 2020 amidst all the anxiety and chaos in the world. So, as we face down our own demons and apocalyptic threats in 2020, I remind every fan of *Supernatural* to think “What would Sam and Dean do?” Carry on wayward sisters and sons—carry on.

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**“That’s a Scooby-don’t”:
The Melancholy Nostalgia of “Scoobynatural”
for *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?***

Erin Giannini and Kristopher Woofter

"I think this cartoon is haunted!"

— Dean Winchester

With its Gothic touches, humour, and ensemble of youthful investigative protagonists, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* (1966-1969) has been a touchstone for many contemporary genre series. The CW’s *iZombie* (2015-19), itself an ensemble generic hybrid of horror, comedy, and drama, references its similarities: “Look at us! Working together to solve mysteries. We should get a van and a dog” (“Zombie Knows Best” 3.2). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), of course, referred to its own ensemble of, at various times, a slayer, a witch, a watcher, a vampire, a werewolf, and a civilian, as the “Scooby Gang,” often shortened to the “Scoobies.” While in both instances—and unlike *Scooby-Doo* itself—at least some of the “monsters” their protagonists fought were real, the aforementioned elements, along with their blend of ratiocination (mystery-solving) and horror, hint at these series’ mutuality.

Supernatural does not conform to the formula in quite the same way. While the long-running show boasts a large recurring cast, the primary focus on brothers Sam and Dean Winchester makes it difficult to classify *Supernatural* as

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an ensemble series in the same way as some of its influential predecessors and contemporaries. Nor are its protagonists as youthful or broadly caricatured as their animated counterparts (Sam and Dean are anything but ciphers). *Supernatural* does, however, frequently employ both Gothic elements (Wright 2008; Edmundson 2016) and humour (Abbott 2011) in a way similar to *Scooby-Doo*. Norville “Shaggy” Rogers and his pal Scooby serve as the gang’s hysterical embodiment, their bodies running, flailing, and laughing, and with a perpetual physical hunger that frequently dictates their choices. In *Supernatural*, Dean Winchester serves as a similar source and target of the series’ humour, right down to his own voracious appetite. The episode “Yellow Fever” (4.6, aired October 23, 2008) in which Dean contracts a virus that makes him afraid and paranoid, plays his fear for laughs in quite deliberate allusions to the histrionic excesses of Shaggy and Scooby.¹ In *Scooby-Doo*, fellow sleuths Fred Jones, Velma Dinkley, and Daphne Blake act as foils to Shaggy and Scooby’s more embodied fears and desires—with Fred and Velma functioning along the lines of strict logic, and Daphne taking on the role of questioner of the obvious (“Why would a ghost need a refrigerator full of food?”). In *Supernatural*, these three’s traits are most often blended into the character of Sam—the “smart one” of the pair—who, while displaying his brother’s penchant for fighting, additionally serves as primary researcher and repository of knowledge. Like *Scooby-Doo*, *Supernatural* draws from a number of cultural and religious traditions for its monsters, and (unlike its predecessor) strives for some degree of authenticity in how it engages with folklore.²

A nostalgia for *Scooby-Doo* informs the meta-textual “Scoobynatural” (13.16, aired March 29, 2018). Despite the humour that attends both the original series and “Scoobynatural,” their bleaker underpinnings are what will form this essay’s discussion of the two, revealing a surprising pessimism that undercuts the seeming naiveté of *Scooby-Doo*, and highlights the pervasive melancholia of *Supernatural*. “Scoobynatural” literally inserts Sam and Dean Winchester into the *Scooby-Doo* episode, “A Night of Fright is No Delight” (1.16, aired January 10, 1970); the very presence of these two “real” monster hunters within that story world thus changes—and darkens—the earlier series’ dynamic. “A Night of Fright” borrows heavily from the Agatha Christie school of mystery, particularly

¹ Thank you to Stacey Abbott for this observation. The echoes of *Scooby-Doo* in “Yellow Fever” become even stronger in the gag reel outtake from the episode, with Ackles literally jumping into Padalecki’s arms Scooby-style.

² For an analysis of *Supernatural*’s deployment of folklore, including it rather than decontextualizing it within multiple episodes, see Koven and Thorgeirsdottir (2010, 189-190).

her 1939 novel *And Then There Were None*, with a group of guests gathered by invitation at a remote island site and an event that promises (and in most cases delivers) their doom.³ In the *Scooby-Doo* version of the scenario, we learn that Colonel Sanders (ahem) has invited a group of family and friends (including Scooby-Doo, who saved him from drowning in a fish pond) to hear the reading of his will, which stipulates that the inheritance of a million dollars is the shared possession of anyone who can stay the night in his ostensibly haunted mansion. Administered by the legal firm of Cosgood Creeps and Cuthbert Crawls, the estate is already in jeopardy at the episode's beginning, telegraphing the obvious—that the lawyers are the culprits (the fact that the money turns out to be Confederate money and worthless notwithstanding). Cackling green ghosts and spectacular hijinks ensue, with the gang ultimately uncovering the crooks in Creeps and Crawls.

“Scoobynatural” is, in essence, an extended treatment of Dean’s nostalgia for a childhood he (and Sam) only partly experienced. While Dean has a small store of pre-hunting memories of home (“Dark Side of the Moon” 5.16) and Sam none, Dean nevertheless strove to shield his brother from the horror around them, despite Sam’s constant questioning. The impossibility of Dean’s ever succeeding at redirecting his little brother from a desire to know why they lived as they did features in another nostalgia-infused episode: “A Very Supernatural Christmas” (3.8). Something of a companion piece to “Scoobynatural,” this ‘very special’ holiday episode takes pains to evoke the ostensible innocence of both childhood and a past era of television. Its opening borrows the 70s/80s era CBS’s “Special Presentation” tag familiar to older (Gen X) viewers, gathered around the TV to watch (or ritually rewatch) Rankin and Bass’s stop-motion *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) or their traditionally animated *Frosty the Snowman* (1969), and there is the diegetic appearance of the long-running “Santa riding a razor” Norelco commercial on the hotel room television.⁴ Aside from the episode’s villains, who themselves suggest a malevolent Ozzie and Harriet (including a prohibition against swearing), the episode uses the built-in nostalgia of the holiday by cutting between the brothers’ past (where Dean lies to Sam about where their father is and what he

³ The novel is one of the best-selling mysteries (and books) of all time; it also serves as the title for an episode of *Supernatural*, in which a stranded group of hunters (including Sam and Dean) are killed off one by one (“... And Then There Were None” 6.16, aired March 4, 2011).

⁴ Each broadcast network had a particular “special presentation” logo. CBS’s graphic originally read “CBS Special Presentation,” hence its use here; CBS/Viacom is half owner of the CW Network on which *Supernatural* airs in the United States.

does to preserve Sam's innocence) and present, in which Sam (initially) refuses to honour Dean's wish to celebrate Christmas. Here, as in "Scooby-natural," Dean is the episode's fulcrum, attempting to preserve Sam's ignorance of the supernatural and maintaining a nostalgia for a less-fraught time in their lives. Neither goal is really possible, however; their past was never that great, and Sam would rebel against being kept in ignorance.

While not explicitly referenced in "Scooby-natural," Dean's earlier lack of success in shielding Sam is reflected in his actions toward the *Scooby-Doo* Gang. Although the episode is humorous from beginning to end, there is a melancholic, darkly despairing tone attached to Dean's attempts to keep the cartoon world free of the real supernatural violence and trauma he and his brother Sam have experienced since childhood. The episode begins with Sam and Dean in an electronics repair shop fighting a large, green, Barney-like stuffed dinosaur, possessed by a curse. We later learn that the curse, ironically, relates to a real-estate scam reminiscent of *Scooby-Doo*'s typical uncovering of sinister plots. The two leave the shop with a gift of gratitude from the shop's owner—a flat-screen TV that Dean makes the centre of his "Deancave" ("... or, Fortress of Deanitude," he adds with childish glee.) Once turned on, the TV sucks Sam and Dean into the world of *Scooby-Doo*, and by extension Dean's desire to return to, if not a lost youth, at least a life where ghost hunting comes with dating, soda shops, and fun.

Dean's nostalgia here includes feelings of loss and Freudian lack, his continual attempts (and failures) to hook up with Daphne paralleling his struggle to maintain a now-inaccessible fantasy world of Saturday morning cartoons, and to isolate the original gang from the truths of Sam and Dean's "real" world. Upon re-emerging from the cartoon world near the episode's end, Dean tells Sam and Castiel that this was the coolest thing that has ever happened to him outside of a sexual encounter with "the Cartwright Twins"—the experience of (lost) childhood fantasy tied explicitly here to sexual gratification. Significant attention is paid to Dean's gendering of the TV ("Be careful! She's delicate," he says, as he and Sam carry it from the shop) in the same way he genders Baby, their 1967 Impala and de facto "home" for most of their childhoods. *Scooby-Doo* and the television medium become a figuration of a lost childhood that never was, but their coveted place in the adult Deancave suggest they are, like Baby, part of an oddly sexualized *and* womb-like space. This metaphorical mix of desired object as both parental and sexual is underscored in the implication by

a resurrected Mary Winchester that Dean himself may have been conceived in the Impala (“Keep Calm and Carry On” 12.1).⁵

In the Freudian psychoanalytical terms the episode encourages, the nostalgia here is tied up in object narcissism—the television set, the cartoon series, Daphne, the Deancave, and the moving image medium itself all become the equivalent of lost love objects that provide for Dean’s needs, feed his ego, and thus form the source of idealized infatuation. That this infatuation in Dean comes in the form of nostalgia attaches it to loss and the melancholic, for Freud the “loss of a more ideal [or idealized] kind” than the type of loss found in mourning ([1917] 1974, 245). As with dread, the melancholiac has lost sight of the object causing the emotional state; the object, not dead, but lost, and therefore imminent—is somewhere, out there. In “Scoobynatural,” the television itself—the cursed “object” that so lures Dean—cannot itself fill in the space of lack. It stands in for the established degree to which Dean’s sense of loss is attached to nostalgia for both the televisual medium and to a genre that mirrors the horrors of his and Sam’s lives.

The postmodern referentiality of “Scoobynatural” derives from this sense of loss made manifest in a reverence for both youth horror television and the moving image as spaces of fantastical possibility. Since the advent of cinema and the work of Georges Méliès, the spectacle of cinematic subjects slipping from the film’s diegetic reality into a deeper fantasy-within-a-fantasy has been a key trope.⁶ The prototypical narrative film in which a character gets sucked into a film within the film is Buster Keaton’s 1924 silent romantic comedy, *Sherlock, Jr.* Keaton’s film also collapses the object of sexual desire and longing into the cinema itself. Its protagonist—a hopeless romantic, cinephile, and projectionist played by Keaton—gazes as longingly at the screen as he does at his would-be

⁵ Contemporaneous series *Doctor Who* (2005-present), particularly during showrunner Steven Moffat’s tenure (2010-2017), conceives of the TARDIS, the Doctor’s vehicle for traveling through time and space, in a similar fashion. It is both the Doctor’s home, and a gendered, quasi-living entity the Eleventh Doctor (Matt Smith) refers to by the nickname “Sexy.” Indeed, in the Neil Gaiman-penned episode “The Doctor’s Wife,” the TARDIS’s consciousness is literally embodied in a woman (6.4).

⁶ Of course in “Scoobynatural,” the so-called fantasy is the product of a curse—a motif in both cinema and television that occurs most iconically in Tobe Hooper’s 1982 film *Poltergeist*, and, as Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott note, across a large swath of television episodes that see the TV set as a kind of “conduit” to another reality (2013, 179-199, 184). Among these, Jowett and Abbott cite two other episodes of *Supernatural*, “Hell House” (1.17) and “Ghostfacers” (3.13), both of which bring the brothers into direct confrontation with the ethos of reality-TV horror pseudo-documentary (2013, 196-199).

love; in one scene, he even mimics what he sees onscreen in a scene that uncannily, humorously parallels his attempts to woo her. In Keaton's film and "Scoobynatural" the uncanny elements linking desire (of all sorts) to the medium are played for laughs, but that they are tied to a sense of longing and lack also gives them unsettling power.

Even though in the narrative of "Scoobynatural" the opportunity comes as the result of a curse, Dean's desire to insert himself into the sacrosanct world of *Scooby-Doo*—to defend it, and protect it—is dreamy to the point of desperation. This kind of nostalgia in "Scoobynatural" also manifests aesthetically, in the animation's painstaking recreation of the *Scooby*-verse. The cartoon haunted house backgrounds are stunning recreations, and some of them look almost like visual grabs of the animation plates from the original *Scooby-Doo* episode (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2: Loving recreation of the *Scooby-Doo* aesthetic in

Further aesthetic nostalgia comes in the allusive acknowledgments of the detective narrative that undergirds *Scooby-Doo*, *Supernatural*, and the series that bridges them: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The battle to keep knowledge that monsters are real from the *Scooby-Doo* Gang results in dialogue similar to *Buffy*, whose Slayer (like Sam and Dean) tends to fight supernatural forces under the radar of the general public:

- Sam:** “Look, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but ghosts are real. My brother and I, we hunt them, along with werewolves and vampires and demons, and ... We’ve saved the world, a lot.”
- Velma:** (condescendingly) “Monsters are nothing more than crooks in masks ... usually unscrupulous real estate developers.”

The literal reference to *Buffy* in Sam’s last comment is a nod to the pop-cultural legacy of that show and its titular character (whose tombstone at the end of the show’s fifth season reads “She saved the world. A lot” [“The Gift” 5.22]), and one of its key conceits—that the monsters Buffy fights are real (and figurative, in the show’s themes), showing *Supernatural*’s writers’ acute awareness of its origins in *Buffy* (Graves 2019) and its crime-detective spinoff *Angel* (Giannini 2019).

Dean’s interpretive stretch of the haunting of the *Scooby-Doo* episode to the cartoon itself (“I think this cartoon is haunted!”) is equally a loaded allusion to the ‘haunted’ medium of television, which brings disembodied sound and image through the ether into the comfortable, idealistically inviolable space of home.⁷ Among the other aspects of “Scoobynatural” that “haunt” the cartoon are the tropes and themes that come through meta-fictionally to acknowledge the ties between genre and nostalgia. When a paradigm shift threatens their experience that all monsters are merely crooks in masks, the original *Scooby-Doo* Gang experiences an existential crisis that can be read as childhood’s end. Velma says, “I thought I was blind without my glasses, but I was just blind,” and Fred and Daphne express a similarly despairing awareness of reality:

- Fred:** (banging his head into a tree) “We’ve been stopping real estate

⁷ See, e.g., Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Emily D. Edwards, *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); and Murray Leeder, editor, *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

developers when we could have been hunting Dracula? Are you kidding me? My life is meaningless!”

Daphne: “If there are ghosts, that means there’s an afterlife. Heaven. Hell. Am I going to hell?”

Some of the most compelling scenes in the episode are those in which the original *Scooby-Doo* characters register shock and trauma (Figures 3 and 4) at various sites and sights of blood, pain, and bodily dismemberment (Figures 5 and 6). The usual gravity-defying rules of the cartoon world are slipping here, and there is a sense of flesh-and-bone weight to the kills and injuries that recall the world Dean, at least, wishes to escape from—and that the Scooby-Doo characters were never a part of.



Figures 3 and 4 (top): The *Scooby-Doo* gang registers “real” shock and trauma. Figures 5 and 6 (bottom): Blood, pain and bodily dismemberment in the no-longer ‘weightless’ cartoon world.

"Scoobynatural" is acutely attuned to the more morbid and extreme embodiments of horror that have oft labelled it exploitative—a "lowbrow" genre, appealing to the basest of senses. *Scooby-Doo*, on the other hand, has tended to mock this aspect of horror with its extended music-driven slapstick sequences, where fear is to be laughed at, and in its rendering its monsters the product of criminal fakery and illusion by episode’s end. In the latter aspect,

Scooby-Doo follows in the tradition of the Radcliffean Gothic, which always strips away the curtain to reveal the machinery of phantasmagorical illusion.⁸ In *Scooby-Doo*, supernatural monstrosity is always a sham—a rather convincing manipulation—while in *Supernatural*, it is part of a very real productive pessimism. And yet both series come together where this pessimism relates to humanity's failures. The *Scooby-Doo* gang and the Winchesters are suspicious seekers-out of human corruption, and it's always there, in both of their 'verses.

In a moment of poignancy that also ironically recalls the many unmaskings of flawed human evildoers in *Scooby-Doo*, the violent ghost in “Scoobynatural” turns out to be that of a dead child who seeks his father (a significant factor of Sam and Dean’s own quest). The boy’s soul is tied to a pocket knife, that iconic adventure “tool” of clichéd boyhood. (It will later be seared to char by a blow-torch.) Thus, the crossover of the mystery from the outside world of *Supernatural* to cartoon-world and back suggests a kind of shared loss as well. The scene of the child mourning the inability to cross into the spirit world to join his father is another in the episode’s compelling images of melancholic longing (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Childhood’s end: melancholic longing in “Scoobynatural”

⁸ Anne Radcliffe (1764-1823), author of popular Gothic novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), also penned the posthumously published “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826), an influential essay that helped to establish this high-low binaristic view of horror as a baser emotion (and aesthetic) that scrambles the intellectual faculties, and terror the more refined or intellectual state (and aesthetic) to achieve.

The episode's narrative goal is to save the child from enslavement by the outside world's real estate developer, who has inserted the cursed pocket knife into the TV to throw off Sam and Dean from discovering his plans. Parallel to this, the ultimate goal becomes, with the help of the ghost child, to undo the *Scooby-Doo* Gang's new knowledge of *Supernatural*'s more embodied, violent human reality, and to reaffirm the more weightless cartoon reality of *Scooby-Doo*. That is, to restore the cartoon's "fantasy" (and ironically, the viewer's reality) that monsters aren't real and that youthful perseverance will yield positive results. For both the Winchesters and the ghost-child, something important to them must be destroyed, suggesting that in the real world, those with the least are often asked to sacrifice the most. When the child finally vanishes in a cloud of smoke, reaffirming the supernatural reality of *Supernatural* and the weightless cartoon reality of *Scooby-Doo*, these various destructions bring us back to the creeping melancholia that underlies both series. "Scoobynatural" both critiques and celebrates *Scooby-Doo*'s essential whimsy and naïveté. In doing so, it suggests that the melancholic longing that drives Dean's desperate attempt to maintain a childhood fantasy is proof enough that the earlier series' "monsters" are real—*supernatural*, or not.

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Rock, Pathos, Shivers: The Music of *Supernatural*

Janet K. Halfyard

Straddling 15 years, *Supernatural*'s music shows both how far TV music has come (because it is slightly old fashioned in some ways, and not just because of the classic rock) but also how good the basic approach was, right from the start. There are three main musical elements that appear in almost every episode, the rock, pathos and shivers of my title. These are: 1) classic rock; 2) the limited use of lyrical, more melodic scoring; and 3) a large amount of generic horror scoring, the latter two categories being written by the series' alternating composers, Jay Gruska and Christopher Lennertz. A fourth element, the use of music as a component of parody and experimentation, occurs more rarely but is nonetheless an important aspect of the show's wider willingness to, as Abbott notes, "bend stylistic rules, blur generic boundaries, and break with narrative conventions" that mark it as part of the dovetailing of cult and postmodern TV that began with *The X-Files* (Abbott 2010, 98)

The old-fashioned element of *Supernatural* is its resistance to what is now the normal approach to TV music, a thematically-driven score. Major cult shows that appeared both before and after *Supernatural* began its epic run, including *Lost* (2004–10), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–09), *Dexter* (2006–14), *True Blood* (2008–14) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), have all explored slightly different ways of employing memorable melodic themes as the basis of their scores. *Supernatural* in contrast has only one theme in its composed score that obviously reappears throughout all seasons, a gentle melody composed by Gruska that points to Dean's intense vulnerability in all things concerning his extended family. That in turn reveals what is perhaps the oddest thing about *Supernatural*'s music: it has only one character at its heart, Dean Winchester, to whom both the recurring melodic theme and the rock music belong. Other shows create a clear musical identity for a multitude of characters. *True Blood*, *Battlestar* and *Game of Thrones* are all replete with character themes of one kind or another and even *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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(1997–2003) gave clear if not extensively developed musical identifies to Willow, Xander and Giles alongside the various themes written for Buffy’s love-interests. However, it is quite difficult to make the argument that anyone other than Dean makes their presence felt musically within *Supernatural*. Very occasionally, a musical idea from one episode will obviously reappear sometime later. So, for instance, in the middle of season 5, we hear a plaintive cello theme at the end of “Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid” (5.15) as Bobby Singer sits by the funeral pyre of Karen, the wife he killed many years ago when she was possessed and now has had to kill for the second time when she returned as a sort of zombie. The same theme reappears in “Of Grave Importance” (7.19), by which point Bobby himself is dead and a ghost. As Sam and Dean discuss what they are going to do about him, we hear that same theme again, reminding us of Karen, reminding us that like her, Bobby may have died once but his death is also not yet final and such situations are unlikely to end well. In the way the final shot lingers on Bobby as the theme plays, it allows us to infer that he too is making the connection between what happened to his wife, the monster she unwillingly became, and what is likely to become of him.

This kind of musical linking of widely separated-events in *Supernatural* is for the most part extremely rare: specially-composed themes simply do not drive the music the way they do in many other cult TV series. Dean, therefore, owns the music of *Supernatural* in a very unusual way, with both that sole recurring theme and the rock music as part of his territory, themselves presenting us with a divided landscape, the soft vulnerability of the melodic theme as counterbalance to the more muscular and aggressive rock. Like his leather jacket and ‘muscle’ car, the ‘muscle’ music was inherited from his father John, but in terms of our experience of the show, that is mostly information we are told, not what we see and hear. What we witness instead is Dean’s ownership of the musical character of the show. Given that the show is about two brothers, Sam is a curiously empty musical space—we are only very rarely allowed to know what he listens to. As Stan Beeler rather laconically puts it, “we must assume that Sam’s tastes in music are closer to that of the target [18-34 women] audience, although they are not given extensive expression in the series” (2011, 21). The closest we get to knowing Sam musically is when Dean takes back ownership of the Impala at the start of season 4 (“Lazarus Rising” 4.1) and disgustedly throws Sam’s ipod onto the back seat when it starts playing the distinctly modern sound of Jason Mann’s 2005 song “Vision.” Even in an episode like “Mystery Spot” (3.11), told almost entirely from Sam’s perspective, the music does not establish a sense of identity for him. Jay Gruska, responsible for most of the melodic scoring on the show, scored this episode and he entirely omits Dean’s lyrical theme while introducing nothing comparable for Sam’s

unbearable trial of repeatedly watching Dean die. In the final act, when Sam spends six months on the road hunting the trickster, the montage is scored with generic, rock-pastiche rather than using an actual song that might bring some level of extra-textual meaning via the lyrics, the choice of artist or musical genre. Even in this most personal of episodes, Sam's musical identity remains muted.

Dean's classic rock music permeates the show at a number of levels, moving between the Impala, various radio alarm clocks in motel bedrooms and the non-diegetic soundtrack; but also manifesting in the names borrowed from rock musicians the brothers give themselves for their FBI aliases, and song titles as episode titles, especially in season 2 (see Beeler 2011, 23). This side of the music speaks to the mission: the rock tracks tend to be fast, driven, active, aggressive even. The other side of the musical coin, Dean's melodic theme, speaks to the emotional cost of that mission. In some ways, Sam doesn't need this theme in the way Dean does: we know Sam is more reluctant to be a hunter, and that he had a normal life as a student and would-be law graduate; Dean's abnormal lifestyle and devastatingly effective violence could make him profoundly unsympathetic, which the theme therefore offsets (albeit helped inordinately by Dean's extreme prettiness and meltingly lovely blue eyes). It is difficult to pin down succinctly what the theme signifies: Zimshan, *Supernatural's* most dedicated music blogger, rather clunkily named it 'Dean's family dedication theme'. I understand what she is trying to say: the theme represents a complex bundle of conflicting emotions, because it attempts to capture how Dean feels about his family, and that is very complicated. There is love, abandonment anxiety, a desire for approval and sense of inadequacy, intense loyalty to family alongside a sense that however much he sacrifices his own needs to the mission, it will never be enough, all bound up in one little theme. It first appears at the end of season 1, usually played gently on piano; thereafter, in perhaps four or five episodes per season, so it never quite goes out of mind without suffering from overuse. It would be beyond tedious to list every single appearance, but some edited highlights are: its first full appearance to accompany Dean's "The things I'm willing to do" speech in "Devil's Trap" (1.22); the heroic, last-post trumpet version of "All Hell breaks Loose Part 2" (2.22) when Sam dies in Dean's arms; Dean's confession to Tessa the reaper in season 4 ("Death Takes a Holiday" 4.15) that he wished he'd gone with her when she came for him in season 2; Dean's encounter with the memory of his mother as he and Sam search heaven in "Dark Side of the Moon (5.16) and regularly in every season thereafter. An extended hearing occurs as John, Mary and the boys are magically reunited for one final family dinner in "Lebanon" (14.13) where it brings the poles of its complex emotional range into play: simultaneously heartbreaking, as they know that this is their first and final

reunion, while also bringing warmth and closure to Dean's need to hold his family together. What this and the other examples shows is how flexible the theme is: it can play to heartbreak, desolation, nostalgia, death wish and life-affirmation.

It occasionally crops up in relation to Sam, and the most notable example occurs at a point where Dean is effectively absent, having become a demon at the start of season 10, his evil nature signified by him singing terrible, drunken karaoke. In "Soul Survivor" (10.3), we hear the theme as Sam looks at family photographs in Dean's room. Here, the music serves as a memory of the real, ensouled Dean as much as it underscores Sam's emotional state, but this transference of the theme to Sam is short lived. By the end of the episode, his soul restored, Dean reclaims it as part of his own soundtrack. Initially, he looks at the photographs as Sam did earlier, but whilst there is gentle piano music, there is no theme until Castiel comes to offer reassurance that things can return to normal, the theme finally restored—like his soul—to Dean.

One of the defining features of cult television is its willingness to experiment, to push what an audience may or may not be willing to accept. It is remarkable how often that experimentation involves music: Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (1986); *The X-Files*' (1993-2002) "The Post-Modern Prometheus" (5.5); *Buffy*'s "Hush" (4.10); regular outbreaks of fantastic performance in *Six Feet Under* (2001-5), *Ally MacBeal* (1997-2002) and *Buffy*'s "Once More, with Feeling" (6.7) among other TV musical episodes; and the recurring device of the demon, Lorne, reading someone's aura and seeing their future when they sing in *Angel* (seasons 2-5). *Supernatural* has continued that legacy of playful experiment involving music, especially "Monster Movie" (4.5) on which I have previously written (see Halfyard, 2016: 126-134). Some of the episodes that involve deviant title sequences to relocate the narrative in a different genre also use music intertextually as a key part of that relocation, including the specific musical and visual allusions to *The X-Files* opening credits in "Clap Your Hands If You Believe" (6.9); the general reference to westerns (visually *Bonanza*, musically *Rawhide*) in "Frontierland" (6.18); and more quirkily, to wedding chapel music in "Season 7, Time for a Wedding" (7.8), where the usual guitar riffs used for continuity between scenes are replaced by similar riffs on a Hammond organ; and perhaps the most elaborately experimental episodes, "Changing Channels" (5.8), which has the longest deviant title sequence, a song visually and musically modelled on 1980s sitcoms like *Full House* (1987-95) and *Who's the Boss?* (1984-92).

The spirit of playful experiment is seen and heard nowhere more clearly than in the way *Supernatural* wrote fandom into the show. *Star Trek* (1966-69) and *The X-Files* were both key in the formation of avid fan

audiences for cult TV (see Reeve, Rodgers and Epstein 1996); and *Buffy*'s makers were among the first to connect directly with fans through a fansite, *The Bronze*, where Joss Whedon and others from the production team took part in online forums. In "The Monster at the End of This Book" (4.18) *Supernatural* took this to a quite different level with the introduction of the prophet Chuck, a pulp fiction writer (well, actually God, but we don't find that out for another few seasons) whose novels are actually his visions of the Winchesters, reproducing the TV series as a book series located within the diegetic reality of the show itself. The book series' diegetic fans know every detail of the Winchesters' lives, write fan fiction and engage in cosplay, as well as getting dangerously obsessed at times (mostly Becky). The show inserts the fans into the narrative, and celebrates them in the 200th episode, when Marie, a high-school fan of the books, stages her musical version of *Supernatural*, with all the characters played by teenage girls, discovered by a perplexed Sam and horrified Dean as they investigate a case ("Fan Fiction" 10.5). Having previously presented Becky as representative of female fandom in a problematic light (not meeting the usual televisual standards of everyday beauty; emotionally unstable; using magic to seduce and marry Sam),¹ the writing of this episode is remarkably affectionate toward the aspects of avid female *Supernatural* fandom that some critics have found deeply disturbing (see Cherry 2011 for an appraisal of this), giving us in particular the "BM moment" (boy melodrama, not bowel movement) that lightly acknowledges the erotic repurposing of the Sam/Dean relationship in a significant amount of the fan literature. In "Fan Fiction", this is turned into a positive when in the final scene of the musical, the dialogue between the on-stage Sam and Dean, itself a recreation of actual dialogue we heard in season 1, is allowed to stand in place of what Sam wants to say to Dean at this point; and this is followed by an onstage rendition of "Carry On Wayward Son" by the girls, sung as a poignantly evocative ballad, the tempo slowed down and the boisterous male voices and electric guitars of the original replaced by female voices in a ethereally high soprano register. Jay Gruska plays the piano for the reimagined rock song: the gentle piano music recalls the lyrical writing and Gruska's recurring theme, bringing the two sides of Dean's musical landscape together in a single space, rock meeting pathos.

¹ It is worth noting that Becky returns in Season 15 ("Atomic Monsters" 15.4). Although her ultimate fate is uncertain at the time of writing, it is clear that she has a happily stable life, still a devoted fan of *Supernatural* but now turning her fandom into a successful online business selling handmade merchandise, which she manages from home whilst also being happily married and a mother. This confident and settled Becky, whilst still very much the same enthusiastic woman as before, is refreshingly uncrazy in comparison to our last sight of her in "Season 7, Time for a Wedding" (7.8).

On one level, one has to ask how can this song be here? It appears in virtually every season finale but only in the extradiegetic soundtrack of the TV show; books do not have soundtracks, and this song is not played by Dean on his car stereo in any episode we see. But it could only have been this song: to all intents and purposes, this is the series' theme tune, the only piece of music that regularly appears at the top of a show that has only a 10 second ident as its usual opening title. The song (normally) only appears once per season but no other piece of music holds such a privileged and iconic position in its narrative—it operates as much as a theme marking the moment of narrative climax in the season finale as Dean's theme points to his vulnerability, and the lyrics of the song can easily be adopted in the narrative as John Winchester speaking directly to his sons, giving it a direct relevance to the ongoing mission. In "Fan Fiction," marking not the start of the episode but its end, not the season climax but the series reaching a landmark episode, we have it musically transformed, reflected back at us in a way that allows it to generate new meaning. For the first time, Sam and Dean diegetically hear this song sung about them and to them, recognizing themselves in it, just as we hear a familiar song made unfamiliar as it sung to us in our own voices, the voices of the fans.

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Love/Hate: *Supernatural* THEN and NOW

Lorna Jowett

“I have my version, and you have yours.”

— Dean, “Fan Fiction” (10.5)

I love *Supernatural*. I hate *Supernatural*. The things I love about *Supernatural* are very close to the things I hate about it. When I started watching it, when it was first broadcast, it appealed because it was a mixture of genres I enjoyed (and still enjoy): horror, action, melodrama. I never imagined I would be watching it for 15 years, and 300+ episodes. Marking the 200th episode, a retrospective in *Variety* noted that “The show weathered the conversion from the WB to the CW, survived the 2007-08 writers' strike, and transitioned through several showrunners—and there's no end in sight” (Prudom 2014). “Since that first Apocalypse, the series has garnered a loyal fandom and, after thirteen seasons and four showrunners, shows no signs of wear,” Florent Favard comments, going on to explain its position in the US television landscape. “Along with *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), *Criminal Minds* (2005-) or *NCIS* (2003-), this is one of the few scripted primetime television series of the mid-2000s still on the air. It is a relic from another time, before the rise of SVoD content producers, when networks and cable channels alike aimed for niche markets and an increasing narrative complexity” (Favard 2018, 20). And this is what makes it so interesting. There are few drama series that have survived this long and from the 2000s to the 2020s has been a period of massive change for television, in the USA and elsewhere.

But this sheer longevity is why I can see how far TV has come, how well TV adapts (or doesn't) from the THEN to the NOW. In the age of VOD and SVOD, *Supernatural's* position as a network series with 20+ episodes per season (for a “normal” season) means that watching it just takes so long. These days only a loyal audience will watch 24 episodes per season for 15 seasons. Viewer loyalty has served *Supernatural* well. It is housed on a

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relatively new network that has had to struggle in competition with the traditional “big 3” US networks. Partly for this reason, *Supernatural* has relied on audience for survival, and has a long, if chequered, history of producer/creator and fan interaction. This sense of viewer engagement and the shifts in how a series’ relationship or ‘contract’ with the audience operates also shows me how far *I’ve* come: *Supernatural*’s final episodes will air within months of my 50th birthday and a fair amount has changed for me since I was 35. Unlike other long-running (though interrupted) franchises like *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* I did not start watching *Supernatural* as a child and, unlike those big name properties, its continuing niche status means it has not become part of culture at large. Yet *Supernatural*’s continuous, unbroken run and reluctance to change its fundamental structure means that its problems are magnified. Florent Favard writes, “Any series reaching more than ten seasons may begin to look like a Ship of Theseus, rebuilt over and over again to renew interest: *Supernatural* is particularly interesting in that the only original ‘nail and plank’ of the ship are the Winchester brothers, around whom the whole storyworld recombines itself season after season” (Favard 2018, 20).

The Winchester brothers. I feel conflicted admitting that I watch *Supernatural* for Dean. Dean is macho and brusque and hates emotions and feelings, he verges on sexist, racist, homophobic, he rejects social norms, is seen living almost entirely among men and is exceptionally violent ... but those things, that blue collar masculinity is always, obviously, performed. Over and over, Dean is shown to be needy, abject, full of despair and self-hate, believing he is not worth love and not worth saving (from sacrificing himself to save Sam in “No Rest for the Wicked” 3.16 to a series of deep depressions across subsequent seasons). As someone who has lived with social anxiety and clinical depression most of my life, how can I not identify with Dean?

Sometimes I feel conflicted admitting I watch *Supernatural* at all. It might seem inevitable that a show focused on masculinity, with two main characters (rather than an ensemble cast), would end up being both intermittently misogynist and queerbait-y. It is, after all, focused on the relationship between the Winchester brothers. As the series continued, reinventing itself in some ways, but not in others, always potentially at the end but never actually ending, actor Jared Padalecki (Sam Winchester) commented: “There were times I thought there were one too many dick jokes, every now and then I felt like we were straying off course, but the fans stuck with us” (quoted in Prudom 2014). The “dick jokes” and “jerk/bitch” language of the series can be wearing, as can its queerbaiting. Early seasons have the brothers continually taken for a gay couple as they travel the country together (since “Bugs” 1.8), and slash pairings abound (two of the most

famous being Wincest [Sam/ Dean] and Destiel [Dean/ Castiel]) in fan readings and fanfic. The series finds fans among women and gay men partly because it demonstrates that masculinity is a performance, and Darren Elliott-Smith argues that *Supernatural*'s early seasons engage in "comic yet homoerotic parodying of masculinity" (2011, 113). Despite the subtext, however, almost all male characters in *Supernatural* remain ostensibly, some stubbornly, heterosexual. Moreover, some of its actors are not comfortable answering questions about slash pairings in panels and at conventions. In an article titled "Jensen Ackles Is a Homophobic Douchebag," Joseph Brennan tackles "Ackles" supposed homophobia, a debate that is itself framed by certain "politics"—of representation, visibility, and identity, for example (2017, 247). Queerbaiting debates have moved on, much as ideas about sexual and gender identity have moved on. Society THEN might necessitate queerbaiting but society NOW suggests that queer identities or queer relationships need not remain subtextual rather than being textual and canonical. Whether slash fiction is conceptualised as "romantopia" or "intimatopia" (see Tosenberger 2008, 5.10)—and male intimacy is certainly a continuing focus in *Supernatural*—Brennan registers caveats about the political value of slash: "While slash may posit an explicit critique of the heterosexual/ homosexual binary, in 'playing with' homosexualised bodies it is often conceived more as a form of 'romance' than as a 'political' gesture" (2017, 254). That is, depictions and valorisation of male intimacy in slash are often more about renegotiating masculinity for reader/ viewer pleasure than about making queerness visible.

The Winchester brothers, the wayward sons. There is no room in this series for female characters and female stories. I love how *Supernatural* negotiates and renegotiates masculinity (not queerbaiting). I hate how *Supernatural* repeatedly, emphatically, kills women. In the last 15 years I have become very intolerant of stories, films, TV series, books, comics whatever, that are all "white man pain," and more recently "white man pain and cis-het bullshit." I happily tell others that I don't have time to waste on stories that mean nothing to me because they never acknowledge me. Yet I'm still watching *Supernatural*. "Female characters have been used to motivate and drive the plot of this show from its pilot," notes Bronwen Calvert (2011, 90) and Agata Łuksza also points out, "we encounter a vast range of women in the series, but none of them survive for long or reach the position of a main character" (2016, 189). The *Variety* 200th episode article includes in a "By the Numbers" sidebar: "6: Number of women Sam has slept with who subsequently died" (Prudom 2014). Both Calvert and Łuksza debate how "Many female characters have been written out of the narrative due to poor fan reaction ... while those women who do not pose such a danger because of their age, sexual orientation or clear enemy status are usually warmly

received by fans” (Łuksza 2016, 189; see also Calvert 2011, 103). Female comic book fans have a term for the way “female characters have been used to motivate and drive the plot” of stories about male heroes: fridging.¹ In other words, the female characters are only in the story to affect the male characters (heroes and villains), and they do this by dying, thus being removed from the narrative as real presence but continuing to haunt it as mythical, idealised absence. From the death of Mary Winchester in the first episode, violently dispatched women form the motivation for the brothers to save people and hunt things. If they need reminding of their purpose, another female character dies horribly (and unnecessarily) as with the fridging of Charlie Bradbury (“Dark Dynasty” 10.21). “In this narrative a strong female character is often seen as taking up *too much* space,” explains Calvert (2011, 91).

Supernatural has some great female characters. It’s just most of them are dead. “I don’t know if they had a plan for Mary when resurrecting her,” one SPNatural Confession on Tumblr notes, “I was excited for her storyline ... but they don’t do anything with her unless it’s needed for the plot” (n.d.). And, note, bringing back women you’ve killed (Mary, Charlie) because there aren’t any female characters isn’t really that cool—especially when you kill them again, as with Mary. Witch Rowena McLeod had the longest tenure of a female character in the series yet, surprisingly, she ticks only some of boxes described above: working on the age of the actors she is less than two years older than Dean, though admittedly she is Crowley’s mother; she spends much of her time as an enemy or, at best, morally dubious. Once she is converted to the side of ‘good’, her time is up. In “The Rupture” (15.3) she uses a spell that requires her death to return escaped souls and demons to hell, with Sam actually delivering the fatal blow.² *Supernatural* does have some great female characters who have survived and deserve their own show but the backdoor pilot “Wayward Sisters” (13.10) featuring these characters did not get picked up. According to CW President Mark Pedowitz, “We did not feel creatively that the show is where we wanted it to be” (in Yahr 2018). The *Washington Post* article quoting Pedowitz notes that “the network also only has a finite amount of room on its schedule, and Pedowitz said they had more confidence in the new drama ‘Legacies,’ a spinoff of ‘The Originals’ and ‘The Vampire Diaries’” (Yahr 2018).

¹ See the website ‘Women in Refrigerators’ by Gail Simone for more detail.
<https://lby3.com/wir/>

² Like Mary Winchester, Rowena is later brought back as Queen of Hell (season 15). Like Mary, this does not mitigate her being used to motivate the ‘boys.’ I repeat, bringing back women you’ve killed because there aren’t any female characters is not cool.

Jerk/ Bitch.

So why am I still watching *Supernatural*? It does, after all, (through episodes like “The Real Ghostbusters” 5.9 and “Fan Fiction” 10.5, for instance) acknowledge that its loyal audience consists of women and gay men—not entirely, of course, but these are the fans that invest in it, talk about, critique it and live with it. Arguably, it lends itself to slash fiction and/or reading queerly and it has tried to address its lack of diversity, if not always very successfully. So, I wallow in Dean’s beautiful pain and I feel his despair, even though I resist the series’ queerbaiting and will never really know whether Jensen Ackles is homophobic. Joseph Brennan points to how fans’ “assessment of Ackles’ conservatism, in particular as at odds with other members of the *Supernatural* main cast (Padalecki and Collins), resonates with the increasing interest within celebrity studies between stars and politics” (2017, 253). I write this piece as the Covid-19 pandemic locked down nations across the world, and the Black Lives Matter movement gained global traction. As a potentially apocalyptic event threatens humanity and causes us to question society’s unequal power relationships, *Star Wars* actor John Boyega spoke at a BLM protest in London, expressing doubts about how it might affect his future career but clearly feeling that the injustices being protested were too important for him to stay silent.³ *Harry Potter* author J. K. Rowling’s tweets about “biological sex” and gender identity, aka transphobia (which I will not repeat here), dismayed many of her fans and prompted several actors who starred in the film adaptations of her books to speak out. In a statement published on the website of The Trevor Project (a crisis intervention/ suicide prevention organisation for LGBTQ+ youth) Daniel Radcliffe told fans:

I really hope that you don’t entirely lose what was valuable in these stories to you. If these books taught you that love is the strongest force in the universe, capable of overcoming anything; if they taught you that strength is found in diversity, and that dogmatic ideas of pureness lead to the oppression of vulnerable groups; if you believe that a particular character is trans, nonbinary, or gender fluid, or that they are gay or bisexual; if you found anything in these stories that resonated with you and helped you at any time in your life—then that is between you and the book that you read, and it is sacred. And in my opinion nobody can touch that. It means to you what it means to

³ When the official *Star Wars* social media feed posted messages of support and praise for Boyega, some fans pointed out that they had remained silent when he was fighting racist comments and criticism about his role in the films.

you and I hope that these comments will not taint that too much.
(Radcliffe 2020)

While I respect what Radcliffe is trying to say to disappointed fans here, I am inclined to disagree. Personal meaning, or interpretation, may well be important, as queer reading has been historically to queer readers and viewers. Public meaning, clear unambiguous signalling and valuing of diverse identities, is, however, necessary in order to shift the dogmatic ideas that shore up oppressive systems. It's time, therefore, for *Supernatural*, its queerbaiting, its dead women and its cis-het white saviours, to be laid to rest. I, for one, will be relieved to put my love-hate relationship with it behind me and move on to series I find more valuable, series that value my identities more. That was THEN, this is NOW.

Dean: Can I give you a little advice? Let it go. The past is ... there's nothing you can do about it now so it's just baggage. Let it go. You'll feel a lot lighter. ("Nightmare Logic" 14.5)

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**“Family Don’t End in Blood”:
Growing Up in a *Supernatural* Blended Family**

An Exchange by Will Dodson and Huxley Bailey

Robin Wood wrote that home and family lie at the center of American horror. This is one of the most cited comments in horror studies, and sensibly so. The home is the first origin of horror because, as Elisabeth Bronfen explains, it is “always already split in itself, familiar and strange, safe and dangerous” (2014, 109). This idea is literal in a blended family. The very concept of a “stepparent” and a “stepchild” is uncanny. In my own blended family, I am their dad, but not-dad. They are my daughters, but not-daughters. They are at home, but not-home. The uncanny nature of the blended family is, sadly, too often a source of horror for children. Abusive stepfathers and wicked stepmothers appear in every genre from Disney animated features to serious dramas (See, for example *Cinderella* [Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, 1950], or *This Boy’s Life* [Michael Caton-Jones, 1993]). Horror is particularly fertile generic soil for such tropes, perhaps most famously in *The Stepfather* series (Joseph Ruben, 1987; Jeff Burr, 1989; Guy Magar, 1992; Nelson McCormick, 2009). Abuse is occasionally even visited on the stepparents, as in the recent horror-comedy *Little Evil* (Eli Craig, 2017).

Less horrifically, the active formation of a blended family can also be an exercise in making the monstrous comfortable, a process which, as I’ll come to below, I’ve taken to calling “uncanny inclusion.” The relationship is not “natural,” in the sense that we do not share genes. In our case, we did not get the bonding time of infancy and early childhood. Our relationships had to be

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formed later, after the girls already developed their self-hoods, after they'd already bonded with their biological father and their childhood memories included the emotional link not just with him, but with *them*, the family unit of their mother and father. Now their mother is married to me, and not to him. Their father has a new partner, who is not their mother. Their mother has had a new child with me, a half-sister (such a mean-sounding word). Their father has had new children with his new partner, a half-brother and another half-sister. That "split," the source of horror to which Wood refers, is their lived experience. My stepdaughters now spend half their time with their mother and me, and half their time with their father and his partner. Their half-siblings spend all their time at their homes; my stepdaughters shuttle between homes. They are never totally settled. They always know that in a few days from whenever it is, they have to move to a new space. That unsettled-ness, that feeling of discomfort is always with them, underwriting whatever mood they are in each day.

Huxley

When you have yet to experience something for yourself, you rely on recounts of a situation told by other people. I, obviously, had never had a stepparent, or anything close to it, so my view on the whole dynamic came from only what I'd heard and absorbed in my short seven or eight years of life. As I'm sure you can imagine, a large majority of those examples were along the lines of the evil stepparent. This made my acclimation to having a new parental figure in my life a little rough, and when confronted with the idea of having to experience this new situation I was less than thrilled. I wanted nothing to do with him, I didn't want my mom to have anything to do with him, I didn't want him to be around us ever again. I thought he was dangerous, actually, and that it was my responsibility as the oldest sibling to protect the rest of my family from that imagined evil-ness.

When Mom first told me the two of them were dating, I was furious. I thought this was the most terrible thing that could have ever happened ever, and that it would just be horrible. The next few months was just me disliking him, waiting for something to happen and have the whole thing explode into the inevitable destruction that I was convinced was going to happen. But, then it didn't. It took me a second to realise it but eventually I actually looked forward to seeing him. Me and Harper were always so excited to have "sleepovers" at

his place, because it meant we got to hang out and watch cartoons all night long. Even after I recognised he came in peace, it was still weird trying to figure out this new relationship that I would have to form with someone who I hadn't really expected to come along at all, even after my parents got divorced. I wasn't quite sure how he saw my sister and me, which meant it was confusing to try and figure out how I felt about him. When we got to know each other better and eventually moved into his apartment, I was feeling better about him but we still didn't have a close relationship. *Supernatural* was really the thing that started to change that.

Will

When my wife and I married, my “new” daughters, Harper and Huxley, were five- and ten-years old. I looked for ways to connect with them, but our circumstances were difficult. Our new baby, Helen,¹ had just been born, and my wife left her job to be at home with her, so I was taking on extra work to keep the bills paid. We were in a relatively small apartment, with my stepdaughters sharing a room. Huxley, our ten-year old, had a later bedtime, and one night I asked her if she wanted to watch Netflix and try out this CW show called *Supernatural*, which my wife had recommended to me. At that point, 2012, the show was about to start its eighth season, and we started with the Pilot episode of Season One. Immediately we were thrust into a story where two brothers, whose mother had died at the hands of a demon, reunited to search for their missing father, a hunter of supernatural beings. The older brother, Dean, was taciturn, distrustful of outsiders, and intensely protective of his younger brother, Sam. It seemed to have some resonance with Huxley, so I put it mildly.

Huxley

I knew Will and mom liked horror stuff, and I was kinda nervous about all that. To small Huxley this show was like peak-horror, so I also was really excited to start watching this thing, especially with Will, because it was something more mature I hadn't gotten to experience yet. After the sixth

¹ The all-“H” names are just a coincidence!

episode, “Skin” (1.6), I remember asking him how scary *Supernatural* was on a scale of scariness (this was after I was closing my eyes hiding from the shape-shifter taking off its skin), and he said it was a 2 out of 10. I was completely shocked because for me, a tiny, easily frightened 10-year-old, I truly thought this was the most terrifying thing to grace the screen of anyone everywhere.

I remember the “Bugs” (1.8) episode, I thought it was so cool but also very gross for obvious reasons. This was before I got super into biology and insects and things of that nature, but I was still excited. I remember that this was when we started trying to predict the “bad guy” or the reason the supernatural thing was happening. I hadn’t done that before, and I was completely terrible at it, but I quickly got better at making connections and understanding the writing the more that we watched together and I saw the things he was looking for.

Will

Huxley was pretty scared the first few episodes. The Woman in White (“Pilot” 1.1), the Wendigo (“Wendigo” 1.2), the avenging spirit haunting the lake (“Dead in the Water” 1.3)—Season 1 leaned right into the horror. I jumped a couple of times myself! But she also got that feeling of excitement, the one all we (former) horror kids know so well, that delicious shiver that accompanies good horror stories, and we kept watching. We made it appointment viewing, a few episodes a week. Some weekend nights we’d stay up to watch two or three. It took several years, but we eventually caught up to Netflix, I think around Season 9 or 10, and then waited (im)patiently for each new season to get posted, studiously avoiding any Internet spoilers. (When the COVID pandemic delayed production of the second half of the final season, we agreed to wait until the entire season was posted before watching. As of this writing, we look forward to starting Season 15 in October!)

Huxley

Watching *Supernatural* with Will was the first thing we really did together. He had shown Harper and me movies before, and introduced us to the 1980s *She-Ra* and *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoons, but those were always more of a group

family thing with everyone. *Supernatural* was the first thing that was just between the two of us, and I think that was really important to little Huxley. At this point I believe both stepparents were present at both houses, but I hadn't made any real relationship with either Will or my dad's new partner aside from the obvious superficial stuff. When we started watching *Supernatural* it showed that he was invested in me as an individual and not just as an offshoot of mom that just came with getting married. I think that was when I started to realise that he thought of me as his daughter too and not just Mom's, or not just a stepdaughter. The show became a ritual. We would watch it when Harper and Helen went to sleep and I was done with my homework. It was something to add to my daily schedule that involved him, which was new and I think it really cemented all of us as a family, rather than ... familial-like roommates. When I watch shows by myself it's more of a way to pass the time and be generally entertained, but when I watch a show with Will it's more about the experience of watching it with someone? (I don't know if that makes sense.)

Will

When we began watching the show together, Huxley did not yet trust me, or have much of a bond with me. *Supernatural* became our shared experience—we have watched every single episode together, in order—and the start of what became a deep and loving relationship. We enjoyed the monster-hunting together, but the ongoing, evolving discourse about family has been an even more important part of our discussions over the years. She accepted my monstrosity, in other words, and our fan experience exemplifies *Supernatural's* fundamental themes of family. Over the years, and seasons of the show, I began to think of the Winchester family dynamic in *Supernatural* in terms of “uncanny inclusion,” that is to say, the ways in which the formation of familial bonds begins with an acceptance of (in Dean's case, grudging acceptance) and appreciation for monstrosity. In my stepdaughters' case, this meant expanding their understanding of what a parent could be, and developing a relationship that positioned me as a father figure separate from but similar to their biological dad. Really, what could be more uncanny than a stepparent? The inclusion of monstrosity within the concept of family involves reconceiving how bonds of love can work. This is most literally true for the bonds the Winchesters form with Castiel, and also (eventually) with Kevin (poor Kevin), Crowley, Rowena, and Jack, for example. But it also includes the relationships—

the trust—the brothers form with other hunters and allies along the way, from Bobby Singer to Jody Mills, Donna Hanscum, and Claire Novak. In every case, the brothers add members to their extended family by recognizing and accepting another's—or their own—monstrousness, their shared exile from "normal" society, and bonds that don't begin or end in blood.

Huxley

When we first see Sam and Dean, they actually are not very close or otherwise happy to see each other. Sam is wanting to go on with his pursuit of normalcy in law school and with his girlfriend, while Dean is frustrated that Sam is hesitant to go with him to find their father ("Pilot"). As the series progresses we obviously see them become close again, but we also get to see more of their childhoods and the effects that period had on them as adults. Both recognised each other as family and had these shared experiences, but they were affected in different ways. These differences make it hard for them to understand each other at some points, because they feel that these shared experiences are so familiar, but can't recognise the opposing effects as acceptable reactions to those experiences. That's actually one of the biggest things I've learned related to family, that even though we experienced the same things, our reactions do not always align.

It can be weird and creepy for someone to have such different views on the same experience, especially with a family member like a sibling. Harper and I went through the same things, but came out completely different people because of them. For a while I didn't know why she acted certain ways or believed certain things (I still don't all the time), but I never connected these actions back to anything in our shared past, because if I felt so strongly one way and acted on that because of this one experience, how could someone feel and see it in a completely opposite way? This is something I noticed with the Winchesters in the beginning, and even onwards throughout the series. Dean felt a responsibility over Sam, but also a loyalty to their father. Sam, on the other hand, felt alienated by his father's work, and never developed that same sense of kinship that Dean had. When confronted with these opposing views on the same experiences they actually get angry at each other before they are able to work through it more. I kind of related to that.

Will

Because Huxley and Harper shuttle back and forth between our homes, their bond as a unit within their blended families has been important. Huxley quickly became protective of Harper, and they became each other's support system as they went through the slow process of adjustment, navigating the times where their two sets of parents came into conflict and caused them discomfort. It's no coincidence that Huxley related in a certain way to Dean. To cope with the stress, she withdrew when it came to expressing her emotions, reluctant to show any vulnerability. She especially connected with the difficult relationship Dean had with his father, John, and the happy-but-complicated reunion with his mother, Mary. As the outside parent, I used many episodes' themes to triangulate conversations between the two of us as a way of checking in.

The show's mix of comedy and horror—the *douche-écossaise* indelible to the genre—became part of our bonding process, a way to let go of any outside tensions that bled over from conflicts between her mom and dad, especially when the stepparents were also involved. And, somewhat terrifying for me, it's also been a guidepost to Huxley's growing awareness of dirty jokes as she grew older. I was discomfited, for example, when we watched "Frontierland" (6.18) and she belly-laughed at Dean's immortal line, "I'm a posse magnet. I mean, I love posse." Such awkwardness aside, our shared laughter opened up space to talk a little about how she was feeling. No matter how close we get, I'll never have the same relationship with her as she has with her dad or her mom, but I am happy that she felt comfortable enough to let me to know when she was struggling or when she was doing well. Mostly, though, I think she saw me as the parent with whom she *didn't* have to have too many difficult conversations, and I was just fine with that role. Laughing together and getting scared together is good therapy for both of us.

Huxley

When *Supernatural* tries to be funny, it really is. I really like the dark humour that happens sometimes, like the murder of the imaginary friends ("Just My Imagination" 11.8), and things like that. Sometimes Will gets a reference

that I wouldn't have noticed and that's always fun too. I always look forward to episodes that are funny, it's always a good balance between dark humour and stress/suspense. Even if an episode as a whole isn't necessarily comedic, there can be some small comedic scenes that are very relieving in between stressful scenes.

I am generally still terrible with horror. Actually, it doesn't even have to be horror, as long as it has some kind of jump scares or general spookiness, I'll probably be pretty scared. *Supernatural* is no exception: I still hide my face when I know a jump scare is coming, or look away when something gross is happening, but I like the show a lot better than most scary things. The monsters are obviously supposed to be scary and mean and whatnot, but not always. A lot of times they're just being dumb; they're just like people who don't know quite what they're doing, so they just guess at making decisions, and get angry if someone says "no" to them. Eating people should be a pretty big "no," but you get the idea. A lot of times, once I get over the initial scare, I appreciate it afterwards. Especially things that are really neat conceptually. Like the one episode with that guy who became a man-eating monster because he was greedy, and then every time he was about to eat someone he whistled. ("Don't Go in the Woods" 14.16). That was creepy, and I liked the whistling.

Over the years that we've watched the show, I have really gone through quite a bit of personal identity figuring-out, as I suppose you do when you're a teenager. I went through about a year of questioning when I was around 12, came out at 13, figured out more about my own values and beliefs, and all kinds of fun stuff like that. I watched *Supernatural* with Will basically as I grew up. As I got older, I found I would pay attention to different things or have new impressions on situations that occurred in the show as we watched it. The broader, real life consequences of the show began to be something I actually paid attention to.

Will

For the first few years we watched together, our shared analysis of *Supernatural* was limited to discussing the mythology of the monsters. As Huxley became a teenager, though, we began thinking about the show in social terms as well, and our familial bond became one of growing awareness and maturity, on both our parts. We discussed ways in which Sam and Dean's masculinities were toxic (and John's, Bobby's, Crowley's, Castiel's, Lucifer's, Chuck's/God's

...). The show pokes fun at Dean's "tough guy" facade, but it's nevertheless true that it's a very male-oriented show, and women have interesting but usually marginalised roles. Other than Mary, Charlie, Jody, Donna, and Claire, most of the dynamic women characters are villains, like the demon Ruby or God's sister, Amara (aka, The Darkness). We're still mad that Charlie died, and even madder that she died off-screen in a completely stupid and preventable way ("Dark Dynasty" 10.21). (That she came back in Seasons 13-14 as alternate reality Charlie does not make up for it.)

We've discussed the whiteness of the show, and our own whiteness in terms of how we view and analyse the show. Characters of colour are few and far between, and often die quickly, like Isaac ("The Magnificent Seven" 3.1), Kevin Tran and his mother, Linda ("Reading is Fundamental" 7.21), or Missouri Mosley ("Patience" 13.3). We could go on. Those who live, like Isaac's widow, Tamara, or Missouri Mosley's granddaughter, Patience Turner, generally don't come back as more than a mention. Sam and Dean's whiteness facilitates their ongoing pose as secret agents. Do we think if the brothers were Black they could just walk up to crime scenes, claim to be agents Mayfield and Hayes, and start demanding access to files and records? In the rural South and Midwest? No, we don't think so. We are not in this space condemning the show for its lack of diversity,² but when we watch we are aware of it and we talk about it. Ironically, *Supernatural's* planned spinoffs, introduced in backdoor pilots "Bloodlines" (9.20) and "Wayward Sisters" (13.10), might have tackled these issues, as both shows planned to have diverse casts. We wish CW had picked them up ...

Huxley

I remember at one point we were talking about the show and the disproportionate killing off/general lack of women characters within the show. We of course talked about Charlie, who was killed off so suddenly without any real main reason I could see other than shock and motivation for Sam and Dean to hurry up and get the Frankenstein plot done with ("Book of the Damned" "Dark Dynasty" "The Prisoner" 10.20-22).

² Various fan essays have made cogent points on this matter. See, for example: Alaya Dawn Johnson, "An Open Letter to Eric Kripke," *The Angry Black Woman*. September 9, 2009, <http://theangryblackwoman.com/2009/09/09/an-open-letter-to-eric-kripke/>, and Tara Roy, "Dear Writers of *Supernatural*." *Medium.com*, January 27, 2017, <https://medium.com/@nerdypoc/dear-writers-of-supernatural-545e1a3c5cd1>

We also talked a lot about Mary, who at that point had just returned via Dean's wishing ("Alpha and Omega" 11.23), and how although we liked her character, she felt out of place at times in the beginning. In fact, she would sort of come and go without much explanation. Even as Mary becomes more of a pivotal character in the show, we see her become a more or less well rounded, intelligent, capable hunter, only for her to act so out of character that leads to her death ("Game Night" 14.17). After witnessing Jack brutally murder Nick, she is quick to question Jack and his wellbeing. However, he is clearly distraught and keeps telling her to stop, but she continues to push him to talk to her and to insist that they tell Sam and Dean what happened. Mary knows full well that despite the strong relationship she'd formed with Jack, he is still a Nephilim with huge amounts of power and a questionable soul situation, who had just got done murdering someone. Up until this moment she has always been smart and calculating, and approached things in ways that just make sense. Now would not be the time to stress Jack out any further. Yet, she goes so far out of basic human and personal logic to push the issues that she ends up dead. It felt weird, sudden, and out of place with her character up until that point, something in common with Charlie's death.

It seems whenever the show needs something for the Winchester boys to cry over and motivate them into doing or finishing something, the go-to move is killing people off (like Charlie, Mary, Ellen and Jo ["Abandon All Hope..." 5.10], etc.). Now, full circle here, the fact that these deaths happen is to be expected for such a show, and male characters die too, but the women are definitely more expendable. When we had these conversations we weren't necessarily always talking about societal interpretations, or representation, or the treatment of different groups within the media, we were just talking about a show we liked and characters we enjoyed. But these issues are always there, and plenty of other fans have certainly noticed patterns of character deaths or exclusion.

It's crazy to think about how thousands of other people are absorbing, processing, and enjoying the same show as we are and having their own thoughts or reactions to them. As I go on into the world, I'm sure I'll find other *Supernatural* fans with their own interpretations, and their own backstories. Maybe I'll go to a con! It's bittersweet in a way, the fact that I've pretty much grown up with the show. We started watching it when I was a little kid, and now it is coming to an end just as I am about to move on to this next stage of life, one where family doesn't play as much of an everyday role. I will leave for college soon after we watch the very last episodes. It's really strange but it also feels like that is the way things should be happening.

Supernatural helped us get closer and really come together as a for-real family, and now the show is going to end, right as I'll be leaving. Even though I will still rely on our relationship for support through whatever happens next, I've grown and changed so much since we started watching, from a kid to a not-quite-kid-anymore. As I go off on my own, I will meet new people who could be a new family in a sense. I actually think it's comparable to our own relationship. I will have to meet new people, and navigate what those relationships are and what they mean to me. Ideally none of these new people will marry my mom, so I suppose that is one key difference. But in terms of accepting new members of a family-like group I think I'll have some good prior experience. Who would've thought a show about monsters would have had a hand in preparing me for real-world interpersonal relationship building?

I don't know what will happen as I go off into the world and inevitably spend my days in a fluorescent-lit lab, staring at bugs, but the things I've done and do now can help me deal with whatever comes my way. So, in growing up watching the show and cementing our relationship, I've learned more about other people and how relationships can work. I know I've said this over and over, but it's really true that *Supernatural* was what brought the two of us together, and that taught me so much. Now, as this period of my life comes to an end, I will have to utilise the things I've learned, a lot of which wouldn't have happened without the show. Even things that Will taught me, totally unrelated to the show or story, wouldn't have happened without *Supernatural* because that is the thing that allowed us to get comfortable and really start talking in the first place. It's gonna be over, and I'm gonna be leaving, and I don't know what else to say about it.

Will

We discuss and joke about both of our gender identities and presentations and how those things too are part of how we think of ourselves as family. I can sometimes be a real Crowley when it comes to her chores, but I also can annoy her with my Sam-ish need to talk about our feelings. She's such a Dean, but also a Charlie (the real one). Looking back over this exchange, I think about how much life we've gone through. Huxley started watching this show as a 10-year-old. I was 34. I've changed and grown over that time nearly as much as she. As we prepare for the end, an end that can't be prevented by just convincing God to just talk to his sister ("Alpha and Omega" 11.23), we

look back on nearly a decade together on our couch, in the dark, while everyone else is asleep, laughing and covering our eyes, sometimes with pie.³

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³ P.S. Harper is thirteen now, and she likes to watch killer shark movies with me. So far, her favourites are *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *The Shallows* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2016). Helen, who is seven, currently tortures me with her love of *Trolls* (Mike Mitchell, 2016), but with luck, I’ll soon return the favour with *Troll 2* (Claudio Fragasso, 1990).

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Of Love and Death:
De/Constructing the Special Effects Body at the Limits of Taste

Rachael Ball

Within horror fan circles, much digital ink is spent bemoaning the state of the modern horror film, so much so and for such a prolonged period that perpetual disappointment has become something of the status quo for well over a decade. Alongside the ubiquitous “jumpscare,” the greatest object of distaste seems to be the use of computer-generated visual effects (or VFX), in particular their replacement of so-called “practical effects” in the creation of sequences of bodily injury and destruction. High-profile horror and gore genre sites like *Bloody Disgusting* and *Dread Central* archive hundreds of such editorials which inscribe value onto practical gore effects while bemoaning the prevalence and the inefficacy of VFX within the genre, while innumerable listicles, fan videos, and message board throw-downs chronicle an ever-shifting array of individual and communal archives of cherished sequences of practically-mounted bodily mayhem. The use of prosthetics and make up, as well as physically modeled reproductions of the human body and its various components and excretions hold for these fans a great affective charge, and for many have come to symbolize a sort of “paradise lost” of truly embodied horror. I should note here that within the massive transnational genre of horror, this sentiment is most strongly attached to subgenres which rely for their affective response on the decomposure and deformation of the inner working of the human (or humanoid) body. These bodily-seated horrors are especially fascinating in this context for their relevance to questions of affective feedbacks, the questions they lead to about differing logics of special effects body-building and bodily entanglements, as well as the genre’s close imbrication with economies of taste and disgust.

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The stated reason for this sense of loss within fan discourse, and the resulting devaluing of VFX work in body horror, is most often that some sense of tangible, visceral “reality” is only present when a practical effect is present as a sculptural, profilmic object which occupies the same space before the camera as the principle actors. While this argument seems somewhat disingenuous—how might an artisanally-produced latex molded head boast more of a toehold in ontological reality than one produced through scanning and coding?—there is much worth exploring in this insistence that some connective tissue is lost, or perhaps more importantly is *felt* to be lost, in the conversion from practical to visual gore. Three general patterns cohere across these seemingly disparate but thematically unified fan discourses—first, that VFX sequences within the horror film lack a certain verisimilitude or acceptable level of photorealism; second, that the absence of a profilmic effects object, which occupies the same space as the human actors at the moment of filming, removes a crucial element both of ontological truth-value and of human presence; and third, that the use of VFX in the production of bodily decomposure and destruction effaces a vital visceral punch necessary for the affective functioning of the body horror genre—namely, that the ‘gut punch’ of the gore sequence’s affect is impossible to achieve through VFX, and conversely, that the gut ‘knows’ when it is being duped.

Any exploration of the logics beneath and the discursive structures scaffolded upon these missing and mourned tissues quickly raises a thorny tangle of questions about the place of the body in relation to network and information cultures and aesthetics, as well as what experiential and communicative connections and flows are possible between not only human cognition and new media virtualities, but also between biological matter and digitally coded and rendered corporealities. Chief among these thorny questions is this: What is materially and experientially distinct between the spectator’s encounter with a profilmic, sculptural effects body composed of latex, corn syrup, and animal offal, and that same spectator’s encounter with an effects body produced through scanning, coding, and digital rendering? In other words, what affective ties and communications pass between the fan body and the architectures of the practically or digitally constructed effects body, and what bodily or discursive logics are at work which dictate the relative desirability of each to the discerning genre fan?

By taking seriously these anxieties, I aim to better approach the affective logics and somatic interactions that flow between the fan body and these two seemingly oppositional architectures of effects bodies, and to ground them within a larger framework of rhetorics surrounding verisimilitude, ontological

truth, and bodily invocation. Utilizing Anna Munster’s generative concept of the baroque fold as interface within new media systems, and tracing a larger pattern of fold logics within the creation and presentation of both digital and practical special effects bodies, I trouble the assumption that increased virtuality must necessarily reduce the fleshy weight of the corporeal, and propose the potentialities of the enteric imaginary as both a reinscription of the biological corporeal within virtual mediascapes, and a potent system for thinking through alternative avenues of embodied experience and interaction with the digital.

I. Connective Tissues: “Anchoring” the VFX Body

A conspicuous common denominator in the ongoing horror fan disavowals of VFX work is the notion that the images and animated sequences produced through such technologies are inherently unbelievable—an assertion that draws upon both a judgement of failed or unconvincing verisimilitude, as well as metaphors of loss. This lost object is difficult to pin down in material terms, which perhaps makes its invocation all the more compelling, given that it can stand in for a variety of different anxieties or discomforts that crop up around VFX-inclusive films. What is lost is alternately described as a sense of reality—most often in reference to the primal scene of the profilmic space, and often connected to the reality judgements made (or imagined to be made) by human performers at the moment of filming—or a loss of the human body (and by extension humanity) itself, particularly when a human performer is rendered either in full or in part through digital animation.

Fan invocations of verisimilitude and photorealism in this context are highly complex, as they can alternately be understood as critiquing from a particular historically-situated moment (the technology is not *yet* as convincing as a profilmic practical effect), or as a more proscriptive claim that the horizon of acceptable visual and textural fidelity to ontological reality will never be reached. Moreover, as Julie Turnock asserts in her study of the rise of VFX out of the Hollywood blockbuster of the 1970s, despite the common rhetorics in technical and fan discourses of VFX as naturally progressing towards greater photorealistic fidelity, the “historically dominant ILM style of photorealism involves a much more complicated and multifaceted example of photorealism than is usually assumed, including a great deal of stylization and what might be called anti-realistic techniques” (2015, 66). Claims of VFX’s unconvincing appeals to verisimilitude also place the digitally rendered effects object in opposition to the profilmic object of the practical effect by decrying a loss of

materiality, presuming a response feedback between the performers sharing the space/time before the camera with the effects object. This imagined construction suggests that a practical special effect constitutes a presence (a physical profilmic object was there), while a digital special effect necessarily constitutes a compelling absence or lack (a physical profilmic object was not only not there, but an empty space had to be created into which the VFX object could later be inserted). Following such an argument to its logical end, this lack would seem to bleed out into the performers sharing this profilmic space/time, in some way reducing the “truth value” of their performance, and ultimately, unavoidably communicating its own absence of meaning to the viewer.

This valorization of the profilmic, practical effect as somehow rooted strongly in ontological reality depends upon longstanding historical assumptions about the immateriality and inorganic nature of the digital—a structuring of the digitally animated effect as both the profilmic’s binary opposite and an excessive representation that signifies nothing. Turnock traces a lineage of what she calls the “technophobic” anxiety in certain strands of journalistic and academic criticism around the loss of “something essential, and essentially real, about the cinema in the shift to digital production” (2015, 270). As Lisa Bode (2015) explains, this anxious critique has an even longer cinematic history, cropping up around the grafting of flesh and elaborate prosthetics and make-up developed in the 1920s to radically disfigure or conceal the performer. The extra-filmic discourses of anxiety and ambivalence provoked by early practical effects’ radical decomposures and restructurings of the architectures of the human body were similar to those attending the rise of full digital motion capture and imaging, which as Bode argues again dredged up the concern that a new special effects technology “removes the physical reality of the body and replaces it with something or someone digital” (2015, 34).

A similar justificatory move can be seen in the case of the transnational action cinemas, in which films that make heavy use of computer generated environments and effects tend to insist upon the fleshy materiality of the musculature of their central bodies. In addition to narrative and visual economies which value human exertion and bodily transformations,¹ this centering of the body’s fleshiness is often achieved through focusing paratextual discourses around the beauty and body-building regimes supposedly undergone

¹ This functions differently in different industrial and cultural contexts—Lisa Purse identifies this most clearly in narrative logics of body training and laborious transformation over time in Hollywood-inflected mainstream action cinemas, while the South Indian Telugu industry instead structures its value system around fantastic bodily potentiality drawn through extratextual legacies of star lineages.

by the actors, thereby effacing the corollary labor of the CG body-building undertaken by scores of VFX workers in the construction of the increasingly outsized musculature of the bodies of central performers. In his exploration of the musculature materialities of the seemingly techno-hybrid literal “hardbodies” of *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006), Drew Ayers suggests that it is both the hyperbolic musculature of the Spartan protagonists itself that, along with paratextual discussions of the personal training and body-building regimes supposedly undergone by the actors, strive to make possible the shedding of digital blood’s affective indexical relation to the body of the viewer, in some way grounding the digitally rendered world through an insistence on physicality.² A corollary process is visible in the case of the Telugu cinema action hero, whose techno-fantastic, VFX-produced star body is constructed through dual projects of literal bodybuilding, the first of which—the individual labor of training and cosmetically constructing the body undertaken by the star himself—is ritually and repetitively valorized in paratextual discourse, becoming a sort of catechism by which the diegetic body of the Telugu “mass hero” is exalted to the superhuman tasks which are his charge.³ The second form of bodybuilding, the collective labor of massive teams of digital animators, optical effect teams, and stuntmen, is effaced and abstracted into the visual signifiers of shredded abs, intergenerational dance-offs, and flying baddies, receiving very little credit in popular press accounts and advertising campaigns which instead foreground the arduous training regimes and martial arts education the male stars supposedly undergo to prep for each new film.⁴

Both of these industrial examples hearken back to Bode’s work on 1920’s popular press and industry publications that insisted upon bodily presence and

² Drew Ayers, “Digital Materialism: “300” Bodies in Virtual Space.” *Special Effects*, (London: British Film Institute, 2015).

³ For the fundamental text on the spectacular onscreen and offscreen body of Telugu cinema’s mass hero, see S.V. Srinivas, *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009). I have elsewhere written on my concept of the “new” mass hero and his techno-spectacular VFX body, in “Body/Building: Figuring the New Tollywood Mass Hero on a Global Stage” (unpublished).

⁴ For example, the majority of the early press buzz relating to the upcoming Telugu remake of the Tamil hit *Thani Oruvan*, starring megastar Ram Charan, take as their headline some variation of “Ram Charan Hits the Gym,” or “Cherry’s New Fitness Challenge,” and even “Anything for a Hit: Ram Charan Goes Vegetarian.” “Anything For a Hit: Ram Charan Goes Vegetarian.” *The Deccan Chronicle*. 27 May 2016; Kirubhakar Purushothaman, “Ram Charan Hits the Gym for His Telugu Remake of *Thani Oruvan*.” *India Today*. 7 May 2016; Suhas Yellapantula, “Cherry’s New Fitness Challenge.” *The New Indian Express*. 7 May 2016.

human effort in composite special effects bodies. First stressed are the hours of discomfort and often intense physical pain undergone by the individual actor, and thereby relating tortured physicality to valued performance; later, these same physical discomforts are connected to the high degree of skill necessary to produce a legible performance through motion capture rigs and digital prosthesis, most visible around the body of work of actors like Andy Serkis and Doug Jones (Bode 2015). In all of these cases, it would appear that anything that might look on its face like the disappearance of the human form into digitally produced environments or bodily structures must be counteracted with a strong insistence upon the physical materiality of the body itself. A more widely used, cross-generic example can be found in the ubiquitous green screen used to insert digitally imaged worlds and populations around a human performer, which is itself by definition an anchoring of a highly technically mediated environment around the profilic body.

The defensive rhetorical techniques undertaken within these major global film industries might seem to suggest that violence's affect necessitates some indexical appeal to corporeal materiality, yet the ubiquity of these rhetorical and visual 'anchors' is not itself proof that without them, we would be stranded in a vast immateriality of the digital, severed from our own bodily experience. Rather, it is proof of the presence of popular anxieties around the possibility of such a digitally mediated unmooring. An exploration of the functional logics behind VFX versus practical special effects reveals that such anxieties are not simply technophobic, but reveal concerns about the bodily/digital interface and cybernetic graftings which are predicated upon limiting Cartesian mind-body binaries that distance human cognition from the full array of biological systems which present alternative avenues of embodied experience and interaction with the digital.

II. Enveloping Logics: The Morph and the Fold

Beyond the stated difference in ontological truth-value in fan discourses that differentiate practical and computer-generated effects, there are alternative avenues from which to conceptualize the natures of these two effects regimes without dipping into technophobic notions of a dismembering immateriality or technofuturist essentialism. VFX and practical effects can indeed be said to rely on different structural and functionalist logics, in which the additive, sculptural logic of the practical effect (the careful adding of layers of make-up or prosthesis to an actor, for example, or the sculptural layering of a latex molded torso) is

distinct from the VFX logic of the fluid, liquid morph. While the use of stop-motion animation and lap dissolves enable the additive model of practical effects work to represent a morphing of one form into another, this transformative motion seemingly stops short of fluidity.

Scott Bukatman (2003) identifies the morph as constituting “a phenomenology of the digital,” in which digitally-imaged morphing transfers the promise of spatial elasticity embodied in virtual reality to the mutability and potential transformation of the body and the self. Bukatman locates such performative elastic potentiality of the digitally rendered body in the modern superhero film as flowing from the logics of the morph within digitality itself, “in which nothing is immutable, nothing is essential” (2003, xi). In a similar vein, Norman Klein traces the digital logic of the morph back through the history of traditional animation, in which the body’s plastic potentiality is enabled by a corollary collapsing of environmental laws which previously prevailed on the morphing subject, enacting a parallel phenomenon in which “gravity itself seems to disappear. Laws of nature collapse,” and the mercurial, “uncanny logic” of morphing triumphs (2000, 22).

Julie Turnock notes that the combination of new digital imaging technologies with “traditional” (practical) effects in the 1970’s enabled an increased “plasticity of previously ‘inflexible’ live-action photography” (2015, 17). Such a plasticity reimagines the film frame as “infinitely mutable and designable,” while maintaining a toe-hold in ontological fidelity through its visual similarity to live-action photography (Turnock 2015, 26). Similarly, Barbara Flueckiger has described the connection between digital imaging in post-1970’s action cinema and “the spectacular stagings of digital or digitally modified bodies [that] transcend the physical boundaries of real, carnal bodies in all directions, and thus make their potential seem almost boundless” (2008, 5). It is clear that the logic of the morph is a compelling mode of considering digital animating and imaging’s rerouting of the limitations and potentialities of the human body, yet it is perhaps this image of the unbounded, interstitial body that provokes anxieties around a ‘digital denial’ of the materialities and biological imperatives of the human body and humanity itself.

In her work on the digitally-mediated body in sci-fi, Stacey Abbott argues that the effects-powered stretching of the human body beyond its corporeal limitations “cinematically construct[s] a futurist post-humanism, in which the body becomes a CG cyborg,” while many, like Flueckiger, have taken up Donna Haraway’s work on the subject to approach the figure of digital/human hybrid (Abbott 2006, 143). Anna Munster reminds us, however, that such technofuturist conceptions of new media as necessarily posthuman or

postbiological “give technology a utopian or transcendental place in cultural development, situating it spatially or temporally beyond embodiment” (2006, 11). For Munster, such conceptions reinforce Cartesian divisions between mind and matter, and are part of larger discourses (such as that of the interface) that work to erect divisions between the technological and the organic, as well as between our cognitive and our material selves, and which, in their oppositional conception of the human encounter with the virtual, cloud our understanding of our richly embodied engagement with the digital.

Commonly theorized and understood in opposition to the more static, additive logics attributed to practical effects work, the liquid morph reinforces in many ways conceptions of the digital as immaterial. Thinking of the liquid morph as the purview of the digital inscribes practical special effects as rigid, limiting, and static by virtue of their materiality, thereby obfuscating the ways in which both modes are emphatically material, transformable in their potentiality, and enmeshed with the body in fundamental ways. Bukatman’s morph, for instance, represents a multiplication of the plastic potentialities of the human body enacted by the digital, without explicit invocation of a severing of corporeal ties. However, the breathlessness of his (and others’) exultations of the unbounded, unmoored, radical potential plasticity of bodies seems grounded in assumptions about the immateriality of digital bodies and ‘scapes. Such assumptions describe a radical bodily potentiality where the traditional limitations of the corporeal are a fleshy albatross to be shaken off by the conversion to digitally powered bodily effects. The additive layers of traditional make-up and prosthesis effects can be said to be echoed in the many layerings in the creation of digital images, the layered graftings of photographed faces or body parts in the composition of stunt bodies with character faces, as well as the layerings of scanned gestures and modeled musculature and skin onto digital skeletal rigs in digital animation. By thinking of practical effects structures as unable to move and transform, we ignore the ways in which they do morph, and the myriad ways in which they employ logics of the fold to collapse fundamental boundaries and divisions, and to inspire sensational, embodied response through aesthetics of material excess, as we will see.

In arguing that “the incorporeal vectors of digital information draw out the capacities of our bodies to become other than matter conceived as a mere vessel for consciousness or a substrate for signal” (2006, 19), Munster draws upon Deleuze and Leibniz to assert the baroque aesthetics and praxis of the fold as an alternative way of conceptualizing the digital as a site of interaction between human bodies and technics. Along similar lines, Timothy Murray (2008) has advocated the baroque motion of the fold as itself an interface

between bodies and digital environments. It is the concept of the fold that foregrounds the dialectical, entangled interactions between “technical and organic forces” which is absent from the concept of the digital morph, reinscribing the place of the body and the material within the world of VFX.

The enfolding of the digital baroque also offers us another way to think through the experiential differences between the practical and the VFX-constructed bodily effects sequence, as a difference of degrees, rather than of kind, in the rapid proliferation of folds. In the spatial, temporal, and conceptual openings, “overlappings and turnings back and forth” (Murray 2008, 26) of the digital fold, one can locate the somewhat confusing provenance of the VFX object in relation to the profilmic, sculptural effects object. While the latter can more easily be understood spatially, geographically, and temporally in a relatively linear manner (by virtue of its presence at the precise moment and location of filming)—and also gestures directly to its own creation (as a product of an individual practical effects artisan or team, many of whom, like Tom Savini and Rob Bottin, enjoy celebrity status and cultic devotion within the horror fan community)—the VFX object gestures toward a multitude of possible spatial, temporal, and geographic allegiances. The moment at which the digitally rendered image enters the frame is far less obvious from a casual viewing of the film, for instance, and the creative and technical labor that produced it is likewise difficult to pin down, particularly given the industry tendency to employ a multitude of different special effects teams from various VFX hub cities spread all over the globe in the creation of a single film, or even a single sequence. The VFX object thus disguises its own numerous enfolded openings onto a vast array of worlds and temporalities, origin stories and futures. It is in part this locative and invocative imprecision that produces a concrete disjuncture between the fan experience of practical and VFX-mounted sequences of bodily deconstruction. It is perhaps more likely that this multitude of foldings, imprecise temporalities, and unclear geographies inherent in the industrial production of the VFX body itself, embedded in the logic of flow and morph, are a locus for distaste and disjuncture for the gore fan, rather than judgements made in an ontological register, or an indexical appeal inherent in the profilmic flow of corn syrup blood.

In problematizing the dismissal or devaluing of the digitally rendered effects body, I don’t mean to imply that materiality somehow does not matter—rather, just as both practical and digital special effects bodies are emphatically virtual, I want to foreground what is expressly material about these digital bodily architectures. It is important not to lose sight of the real connections and communications that humans (and biological systems of all kinds) can have with

the nonhuman, or even with object materialities—which goes a step towards explaining the deep affective and temporally layered relationships and mediations possible between practically produced special effects’ bodily architectures and the fan body. However, just as we recognize the value of this object materiality, so too must we realize that the VFX produced object also has a materiality—it too is the product of a certain amount of artisanal labor, it too is rigorously sculpted and modelled and built, it too can commune with biology in all manner of ways. It simply operates within different logical and affective circuits and structures, and the creative labor that produces it is much more spread out, distributed and invisible (as well as globally seated and economically precarious).⁵ The enfoldings of the digital baroque offer us one way of asserting both that materiality matters—and that biological matter matters—while also opening up what biological processes that embodiment might include, for example. In the next section, I move beyond the easy binaries of morph vs. additive stop motion, to better examine the shared logics and characteristics of practical and digital special effects bodies, through the case study of the practically-mounted werewolf transformation (likely the most iconic representation of cinematic bodily morphing through practical, additive means) before considering the layered composure and decomposure of the digitally-produced special effects body in Paul Verhoeven’s *Hollow Man* (2000).

III. The Skin We Live In: The Shifting Anatomy of the Wolfman

In 1981, two American films were released within 4 months of each other which both sought to advance the werewolf transformation scene through the use of pioneering strategies of practical special effects. The first was Joe Dante’s *The Howling*, which focuses on television news anchor Karen White, who, after a traumatic encounter with a serial killer in a coin-operated LA porno booth, suffers amnesia and recurrent nightmares, and is advised by her doctor to spend a few weeks relaxing at his countryside “colony,” a mental health retreat. Once there, her colleagues discover that the killer Eddie Quist, ostensibly killed during Karen’s police rescue, has disappeared from the morgue, eventually leading them to his home at the colony. Karen discovers that the entire colony are secretly werewolves, and escapes with one of her fellow

⁵ See Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, as well as Shanti Kumar and Michael Keane, in *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*, eds. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

reporters after receiving a cursed bite herself. Determined to expose their existence, she goes on the air upon returning to LA, transforms into a wolf on live television, and is summarily shot by her colleague with a silver bullet. The film then ends after we see one of the colony members picking up an unsuspecting trucker in a dive bar, pausing to hungrily order a rare hamburger.

The second film, more widely recognized outside fan circles, is John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London*. Briefly, the narrative concerns two backpackers in England who are mauled on the moors by a werewolf—David survives, while his friend Jack is killed. As David convalesces in a London hospital and begins to transform nightly into a wolf himself, he receives increasingly urgent visitations from a progressively rotting Jack. David transforms for a final time and rampages through Piccadilly Circus, where he is ultimately gunned down by the police.

In both films, the clear centerpiece is a lengthy scene of a man's transformation into a werewolf, within which in both cases the apparent morphing of the body and of the face, without recourse to stop motion animation of still images, functions as something of a virtuosic money shot, on the promise of which both films were funded ("Unleashing the Beast," 2001; "The Making of *American Werewolf in London*," 2001). Special effects designer Rick Baker was approached to work on both films, providing concept work for both before recommending his protégé Rob Bottin for *The Howling* after choosing to sign on to *American Werewolf*, yet the strategies employed to achieve their shared goal differ significantly in their approach and stylistic effect. Both centerpiece sequences utilize manipulable, movable layerings of prostheses animated through internal mechanical apparatuses and offscreen puppeteering. Yet, while *American Werewolf* achieves the motion of extension and elongation of its character's body through the manipulation of expandable skeletal structures, *The Howling* focuses more on rhythmic expansions and contractions of the body and its parts through the use of inflatable subcutaneous bladders, suggesting radical potentiality and a roiling biological fecundity ("Unleashing the Beast," 2001). In looking closely at these two sequences, and the larger formal and aesthetic structures of which they are a part, I consider the ways in which their liminal play with threshold zones between fundamental cultural and biological oppositions such as inside and outside, man and animal, city and wilderness, culture and nature, man and meal—and with the mediating technologies which regiment and make safe the liminal passages between these zones—are elaborated through the folding, unfolding, and enveloping logics of the practical special effects body.

In response to technofuturist conceptions of new media as necessarily posthuman or postbiological, Munster's work on the baroque fold is expressly intended to reinscribe digital bodies and worlds with materiality and corporeal weight and engagement, yet in many ways it is highly generative in helping us approach the logics of the fold within practical special effects sequences as well. Munster's examination of the baroque *Wunderkammer* offers a potent image for approaching the folding and unfolding logics of the practical special effects body, and this body's use within the body horror gore sequence. The 'cabinet of wonders' tradition, as the basis for Western museum culture, offers an aperture onto "an epistemology that did not operate via binary divisions between nature and technics" (Munster 2006, 11). It freely mixed different aesthetic and scientific threads, and forged multiple crossovers between artisanship and biological matter, in much the same way that it combined a myriad of object materialities in a presentational style grounded in techniques of humor, the surreal, and "affective relations to 'science'" (Munster, 2006, 11). Munster uses Frederick Ruysch's renowned 17th century cabinet as an example of the science of anatomy formulated as art in the register of "grotesque delight and humor" (2006, 80). These affects come in its incorporation of fetal skeletons, stretched stomach lining, colorfully preserved constellations of arteries and veins, and other "bodily bits" in the creation of dioramas which did not allow visitors to passively absorb rational scientific knowledge, but instead required them to "actively create this knowledge through the admiration of the cabinet's contents and in their marvelous, unfolding modes of display, modes that included incongruence, humor, surprise, illusion, visual amplitude and trickery" (Munster 2006, 80). In the humorous and expressive, rather than purely representational, models of the body and its components, these unfolding (and enfolding) structures demonstrated "the heights to which science, as an art turned toward the wonderful, could aspire" (Munster 2006, 77).

In their combination of various haptic materialities, as well as their sensational, expressive, and even explosive presentation according to modes that might be considered in excess of "properly" rational scientific presentation, such cabinets provide a productive window onto the practical special effects body, which enacts through folding, excessive presentational logics a corollary merging of biological matter and technics. Enacting anatomy "turned toward the wonderful," the body horror film's gore sequence enacts a cabinet of wonders around the practical special effects body, itself an explosive, unfolding, and enveloping mélange of mechanical riggings, animal viscera, and human limbs, organs, and excreta, both simulated and real. In many cases, these

sequences craft miniature Wunderkammer-like openings out of the body's orifices and cavities themselves. These structures, like the cabinet of wonders, model (and make a marvel of) the body's component parts, while also making full use of expressionistic techniques aimed at channeling and inspiring sensation, rather than (or perhaps, in excess of) striving toward pure anatomical fidelity. A striking example of this expressionism occurs in David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981), in which the explosion of a character's cranium is achieved through the exploding of a sculpted plaster head filled with many gallons of corn syrup blood and animal offal, a composite substance which for 47 frames splatters upward to arc across the entirety of the screen (Furze 2015, 197). As Robert Furze notes, materially and texturally, the effect can claim "little equivalence to the contents of a real human head," achieving its visceral impact not through ontological fidelity to the stuff of actual human gore, but rather through its expressive, excessive, "somewhat indescribable qualities" (2015, 197).

In the centerpiece transformation sequences of both *The Howling* and *American Werewolf*, multiple layers of makeup appliances, latex skins and faces, prosthetic limbs, organs, and even entire bodies are grafted onto the performer's body to elaborate a gradual scene of a morph from a humanoid form to that of a hybridized, giant bipedal or quadrupedal wolf. Both Dante and Landis describe their approaches to the films as prioritizing new logics and techniques in representing a cinematic monstrous morph—Dante explicitly describes planning to break with previous cinematic reliance on lap dissolves, which could approximate transformative motions while stopping short of a liquid morph presented within a single take ("Unleashing the Beast," 2001). In both cases, special effects designers Bottin and Baker turned to skeletal mechanical structures which could be skinned over both by latex approximations of the performers' dermis, and be grafted onto the body of the performer itself as prosthetics. These mechanical structures stopped short of animatronic autonomous motion, requiring the bodily labor of special effects crews to manipulate them. For *The Howling's* pivotal scene of Eddie Quist's assumption of his werewolf form, Bottin designed a series of bladders (ultimately employing dozens of condoms and a large hot water bottle) to be layered around the performer's body and sculpted prosthetic forms, and then covered over by latex skin. These were connected by a series of wires and tubes to the mouths of the offscreen production assistants, who would rapidly inhale and exhale to inflate and deflate these subcutaneous balloon shapes, stretching Quist's skin and limbs to create the disquieting effect of a body wracked by bubbling, festering, suppurating flux, the shapeshifting potentiality of which could extend in any

direction. This roiling potentiality which stretched the body's shape within single takes was supplemented with the swapping in and out, masked by cutaways, of multiple prosthetic molded heads and limbs, which depicted Quist in a gradual progression of transformation into werewolf form.

For the scene in which David first transforms in *American Werewolf*, Baker constructed a different set of skeletal technics, pressing long syringes into service underneath the latex skins of the makeup appliances and prosthetic members attached to actor David Naughton's body, which through concealed mechanics allowed offscreen assistants to press the plungers of the syringes down, extending the wire forms to create a slow stretching and elongation effect. Through these devices David's body and face is displayed extending into bizarre shapes within single takes, and again a progressive series of "change-o-heads" limbs, and hair and skin textures were grafted onto the human body to link together this stretching motion into the full elaboration of a werewolf morph ("The Making of *An American Werewolf in London*," 2001).

The baroque *Wunderkammer* offers us a view onto the practical special effects body which attends to the melding of multiple materialities into a grafting of mechanical prosthetics and biological flesh, as well as the visceral address of such dismembered, manipulated, constructed and deconstructed bodies, which is intrinsically tied to the logics of the fold. It is in these practical transformation scenes that the logics of folding, unfolding, and enfolding inherent in the practical special effects body are clearly articulated, as multiple different object materialities are folded together and enmeshed. This comes in the grafting of biological structures and membranes sculpted from latex, plasticized rubber, synthetic fibers, and clay press skeletal forms, blood and viscera created from animal entrails, gelatin, and corn syrup, together with human skin, sweat, and tears. The performer's appendages must be folded and bound down to allow for the attachment of prosthetic limbs,⁶ and wide swaths of the body become enfolded and enveloped by applications of delusory skins, exposed organs, and even simulated recessions into the body itself. The logic of the fold in these scenes is also a folding into themselves of exterior and interior surfaces, as the exterior edge of human skin becomes interior, for example, and the expelled breath of a special effects crew enacts a physical distension beneath the skin of the special effects body, enacting a collapsing of divisions between

⁶ Sometimes even the entire body must be enfolded onto itself and concealed—for the final portion of the *American Werewolf* transformation, actor David Naughton crouched into a small recession in the floor with only his head exposed, which was then attached to a massively stretched, puppeted pre-sculpted full body prosthetic. "The Making of *An American Werewolf in London*."

inside and outside which furthers these films' playful engagement with and transgression of liminal zones and boundaries represented by the wolfman figure.

Within the larger unfolding of the radical transformation of bodily forms and architectures through the use of special effects technique, these sequences enact a multitude of layered folds, through which sight becomes tied to the act of unfolding as revelation, and the sanctity of the body's seals is broken as apertures to the corporeal interior are ceremoniously opened and unfolded for the viewer's privileged sight and pleasure. The effect mirrors the union of sight and revelation in the unfolding of scenes of the numinous Bernhard Siegert identifies in the fold logics of 16th century Flemish painting (2014, 198). This linking between the visceral and visual apprehension through techniques of the fold, as we shall see, is also articulated in the VFX body, and in its enmeshing and unfolding revelation of interior biological zones presents a useful object for considering the role of viscera not simply as presented within the body-as-*Wunderkammer*, but as a system implicated within larger patterns of experience, fandom, and consumption within the body horror genre. I will now consider the gut as a site for conceiving both the emphatic viscosity of the practical special effects body's materiality and address, and also the corollary judgements of moral opprobrium, disgust, and allegations of extreme bad taste which swirl around these scenes, the genre at large, and the bodies of its fans.

IV. Disgust and the Enteric Nervous System

In her exploration of the psychosomatic body as an opportunity to reconsider the value of biological determinism for feminist conceptualizations of the body, Elizabeth Wilson quotes Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi's call to approach biology "from the other side" (2015, 155) in order to rescue what connective tissues of somatic transformation fall out of physiological and anatomical constructions of the human body. The "other side" Ferenczi refers to is psychoanalysis, but his call to step beyond accepted vantage points of the biological offers for Wilson a jumping off point to consider ways in which hierarchical models that enthrone the cognitive function of the brain or central nervous system limit our ability to conceive of other types of thinking, experiencing, and feeling that are spread out throughout the soma, while also enshrining human cognition as both separately routed and superior in function to biological matter of all kinds (Wilson 2004). Wilson's notion of 'the brain in the gut' offers a model to consider embodied affective relationships

between viscerally hailed fan body and special effects bodily architectures. It also highlights—much as the concept of the enfolding digital baroque does—that biological matter matters within new media technologies and environments. Following Wilson, there are a multitude of ways of embodied interacting with virtualities and the digital that do not sever cognition from the fleshy weight of the physical body—that do not see the body as something that must be cast aside in order to free the mind to interface with the digital immaterial.

The enteric nervous system, “a complex network of nerves that encases and innervates the digestive tract from the esophagus to the anus” (Wilson 2004, 24), is heavily implicated with the genre of body horror, and the gore sequence in particular. The enteric system’s most obvious affective feedback is that of disgust, the hallmark affective response of the genre. In her working toward a definition of the offensive film as “cinema vomitif,” Nikita Brottman notes that “by displaying the nauseating, these movies induce nausea; they are both a spectacle to be witnessed and a part of our bodily lives” (2005, 3). Alongside the disgust which is (most often) pleasurable experienced by the fan at the viewing of scenes of bodily mutilation, there is also the wider disgust that is directed towards the genre as a whole, and which functions to structure and inform wider regimes of cultural taste classifications. William Ian Miller identifies “disgust’s powerful image-generating capacities” as fundamental to “the important role it plays in organizing and internalizing many of our attitudes toward the moral, social, and political domains” (1997, 11). These disgust-inspired judgements of moral opprobrium are not simply culturally vital, as in the case of Bourdieu’s class-inflected taste distinctions, but also have a long history of driving legal and economic action within the genre of body horror and the exploitation film—made clear in the UK’s “video nasties” legislation in 1984, as well as *Cannibal Holocaust* director Ruggero Deodato’s highly publicized joint obscenity and murder trial.⁷ This curious power of disgust to both dwell intensely within the body and its orifices, as well as travel far beyond it, is conceptualized by Miller as an “[explosive] world of meaning, coloring, vivifying, and contaminating political, social, and moral orderings” (1997, xii).

This curious interior and exterior mobility and vitality of the affect of disgust calls to mind Wilson’s (2004) exploration of the digestive system as interstitial boundary, which like the skin separates us from the exterior world, yet which is unique in that it itself contains an exterior zone, in which digestion necessitates a tunnel within us that “allows the outside world to pass through

⁷ See Julian Petley, ““Are We Insane?”: The “Video Nasty” Moral Panic” and Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films*.

us” (44). Given this unique connection and interaction with the outside world, the gut is vitally implicated in our relationality to others and the environment. Rather than simply metaphors for internalization, ingestion and digestion, Wilson suggests, are themselves literal mechanisms of relation and intersubjectivity (2004, 44). It is this mechanism of relationality and lived emotional experience rooted in the enteric nervous system that beckons us to consider what types of bodily ‘cognition’ might be implicated in visceral affective relationships with media, and how we might more broadly conceive of the biological realities of embodied media experience.

Given the visceral subject matter and affective appeal produced by the layered foldings and enmeshing of the special effects body in the body horror gore sequence, the inside/outside liminality of the intersubjective, interstitial border zone of the human gut, itself a series of nestled interior folds constituting an exterior zone, seems a valuable element in conceptualizing such modes of cinematic address. In the case of the werewolf transformation sequence, the gut is centrally located within the logics of the existence and contaminating spread of the werewolf figure. The ravenous wolf is threatening precisely because he is likely to indiscriminately devour and digest living human tissue, embodying not just the possibility of a violent death, or a contaminating or cursed bite, but also of the potential for cannibalistic consumption. By virtue of his ability (or imperative, depending upon the legend) to shapeshift into animal form, a reversal of this cannibalistic meal is also disquietingly possible. This nauseating swirl of potential anthropophagic transgressions becomes localized to the image of the wolf man’s ravenous, cavernous mouth. As Miller notes, the body’s orifices are always already breeding grounds for disgusting imagery, as unavoidable breaks in the protective seal of the body, as well as “holes that allow contaminants in to pollute the soul ... the passageways through which substances pass that can defile ourselves and others too” (Miller 1997, 58-9). And their association in the werewolf’s case with a virus-like curse, which threatens to mutilate not just the body but the eternal soul, makes them all the more eerie as passageways (Miller 1997, 58-9).

Like the doorway, the threshold of the mouth (and by extension the gut) is culturally mediated by ritual, practice, and technology in an effort to divest it as much as possible of its mysterious destructive powers. In his work on cultural techniques, Bernhard Siegert examines at length the role of the Christian communion in inaugurating a massive tangle of cannibalistic possibilities centered around the collective consumption of the meal—possibilities that are exacerbated by the profoundly disgusting and contaminating potentialities that arise from the space of the table (Siegert 2014, 39). The technologies of the

tablecloth, the spoon, fork, knife, as well as a multitude of regulations governing the etiquette of shared vessels, like the fold of the gate or the door, are erected against the inevitable possibility that a meal might “descend into a partial cannibalism in which everybody eats everybody” (Siegert 2014, 45-6). The figure of the wolf man represents the threat of perversion of the boundaries between man and meal, through his own liminal coexistence on both sides of this divide, as well as his animalistic rejection of the cultural technologies which ensure communal safety from cannibalistic (and other) contamination. In *The Howling*, the profoundly disgusting and unsettling potentialities of the transgression of these boundaries manifests in a diegetic obsession with meat which exceeds or escapes the protective power of technologies and rituals of the table. Karen’s colleagues, when visiting the morgue, are confronted by the combination of exposed brain matter and bloody autopsy tools occupying the same grimy counter as the coroner’s casually unwrapped hamburger and styrofoam cup of coffee. The coroner then refers to the bodies under his charge as simply “the meat.” Later, immediately after Karen’s head is blown apart by a shotgun blast following her televised transformation, panicked network employees switch from the live feed to a dog food commercial, matching the previous image of her fatal wounding to the sickening, sloppy plop of unidentified chunks of meat into a dog’s bowl in close-up. Finally, the film ends on a slow zoom into sizzling raw hamburger meat on a fry cook’s griddle, as the credits roll. *The Howling* extracts all of the disgusting thrills embodied in the cannibalistic threat of the werewolf’s gaping mouth, suggesting the futility of such table practices and techniques, while also linking the viewer’s consumption of the tortured and eviscerated special effects body to another type of cannibalistic consumption. *The Howling* foregrounds the subversive power of both the gut and its affinitive emotional feedback, disgust, in both the production and consumption of these decomposed, destroyed, and dismembered special effects bodies—so often created with the aid of animal flesh and other comestibles, like corn syrup and gelatin—in a literal feast for the eyes.

V. Biological Wanderings: Skinning the Digital Corporeal

Contemplating the original conceptualization of hysteria as the literal unmooring of the womb to wander freely about the body, Wilson offers the provocation that “perhaps all biology wanders” (2004, 13). Her suggestion immediately calls to mind the materialities of body horror, in which the ubiquitous motif of the opened body and displayed viscera becomes something

of a baroque *Wunderkammer*, in which biology bites back. Consider the alien-infiltrated intestines of *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) which transform a man's torso (his gut) to a gaping maw with which to devour the people around him, or biology in revolt in *City of the Living Dead* (Lucio Fulci, 1981), in which possessed organs force themselves out from their owner's own screaming mouth, or the dripping biology that constitutes the figure of the rotting zombie horde. Wandering biology also offers us a potent way for thinking against models of our bodily materiality as locked in one space and in one function, of which the mind is the only element free enough from fleshy boundaries to interface with the vast immaterial void of the digital. In this section, I explore the spectacular VFX-produced body at the center of Paul Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000)—an “invisible man” reimagined as a radically shapeshifting grotesque of layered human anatomy—as a way to consider the role of unfolding and enmeshing logics in the material elaboration of the digital corporeal, particularly located around the appearance (and disappearance) of the skin. Like the practically-mounted wolfman morph, the *Hollow Man*'s exterior and interior zones become folded unto each other, and the unfolding presentational logics of the body-as-*wunderkammer* formulate inner anatomical and organic structures as a visual marvel. Meanwhile, the film's visual foregrounding of its erstwhile invisible man as flayed viscera and organs—formulating horror through biology out of place and emphatically *not* out of sight—together with its insistence upon mapping the fleshy weight, volume, and topography of its seemingly immaterial central body, all converge to resist easy divisions between additive practicality and digital immaterial morphs.

Hollow Man centers around a remarkable special effects body, produced primarily through digital effects work, that presents both a flayed, powerfully mobile biological materiality exposed for the eye of the viewer, and a completely eviscerated husk as an apparently empty, yet violently ambulatory skin. *Hollow Man*'s narrative concerns a group of military scientists and pathologists developing an experimental serum capable of making mammals completely invisible, by placing them in an indefinite state of “quantum phase shift” which lasts until the proper antidote is administered. Having successfully made invisible all manner of animal test subjects, it is not until Dr. Sebastian Cane singlehandedly makes viable an antidote that the project becomes feasible for human experimentation. Cane, hungry for power and laboring under significant delusions of grandeur, talks the team into letting him be the first human to undergo the procedure, but becomes trapped in an invisible state. Gradually, he begins devising ways to escape from the watchful eyes of the team he once led, perpetrating an escalating series of violent sexual and physical abuses, first on

strangers, and ultimately on his erstwhile colleagues after he traps them in their locked-down lab. As Cane sets to work murdering the scientists, Dr. Linda Kay escapes, confronting Cane and ultimately casting him down an elevator shaft to perish in the chemical fire below.

Materially, the “phase-shifted” Dr. Cane is a complex creature indeed, appearing alternately as an eroding or reforming series of bodily layers, as either flayed musculature and bone or hollowed shell, and as a total void of perceptible form, often partially “skinned” over with nearby objects like electrocardiographic pads and bedsheets. Visually, Cane’s radically shifting anatomy congeals around three major forms throughout his life as an “invisible man”: the flayed man, the hollow man, and the invisible phantom. Though the film’s central horror is ostensibly the promise of the latter form, a powerful human completely severed from a (visible) body, Cane is rarely depicted in this form without the aforementioned improvised “skins,” and almost never without some limited visual mapping of his bodily topography or location, as when an apparently floating cup or knife belies the location of invisible fingers. It is worth noting that the difference between the three states of visual presentation Cane undergoes is one of degrees, not of kind; here, biological matter is modeled as a series of layers, with each form representing a removal or addition of certain visible bodily strata.

This layering of the body into anatomical sections, progressively made visible or invisible, is foregrounded in the films’ centerpiece VFX sequences of, first, the gorilla, Isabel, and, later, Dr. Cane, undergoing the procedures to become invisible and to reenter the world of the visible. We are first introduced to the procedure as the team continues its experimentation on Isabel, one of many captive creatures in the lab, administering the antidote Cane has just developed. The completely invisible Isabel is initially only mapped on the screen through a tangle of medical tubes and monitoring wires, and as the antidote is injected her digitally animated arterial system slowly comes into view, shifting into various brilliant colors as constellations of arteries and veins seemingly bloom out from the injection site. These are rapidly followed by the “growth,” or reappearance, of her skeletal structure, then her musculature, organs, and finally skin and hair. Significantly, these systems do not sprout in whole, one after the other—instead, her body (and later, in a nearly identical sequence, Cane’s) reappears as an architecturally deep, recessed space, where the topmost edges of skin and musculature are the last to (re)grow, maintaining for as long as possible a frame around and an unobstructed view of the surging biological ferment of the body’s seemingly regenerating interior—the digital special effects body as *Wunderkammer*. This layered approach to the body’s biology is

maintained in Cane's appearance as a flayed anatomical monstrosity later in the film, when an electrical shock transforms the previously invisible (though often skinned over) doctor into a partially reappeared figure, in which apparently every biological layer has been restored save his skin. It is significant that the climactic final sequence in which Cane murderously pursues the surviving scientists, and is finally defeated by Linda, depicts the monstrous invisible man not as invisible at all, but simply as removed of the "veil" of his skin.⁸ Like the special effects body of the wolfman, interior zones and systems are here made exterior, and vice-versa, as biological matter is both presented for viewing and enfolded and turned onto itself.

Throughout *Hollow Man*, the folding, unfolding, and enmeshing logics of the special effects body are located most clearly in the skin, whether in Cane's visually unstable epidermis which reveals interior systems beneath, the series of improvised skins which are placed over his phase-shifted body, or in the multiple colored bodysuits employed in the creation of the digital effects body itself. Three of these bodysuits were used, one green, one blue, and one black, specifically chosen for their relative performance in different environmental conditions, in order to allow for the films' obsessive motif of partial skinning without recourse to full digital skeletal rigs and animation—rather, each necessary shot was filmed twice, with identical camera movement, so that actor Kevin Bacon could easily be digitally removed from the final frame while preserving his gestural performance and the topology of his body underneath a given skin ("Anatomy of a Thriller," 2001). In their folding, textile nature, these fabric jumpsuits are part of a larger play with the surface of biological and object skins within the film, as well as being a necessary component of the visual representation of this play. As I mentioned before, one of the three major forms the shapeshifting Dr. Cane assumes is that of the titular hollow man, an effect achieved by the full, rather than partial skinning of Cane's fully invisible body. This occurs when the scientists, realizing they will be unable to return Cane to visibility in the near future, pour a flesh-colored latex polymer over his entire body, in the manner of taking a life-mold⁹ that, once it has solidified, is slit to

⁸ Michel Serres' suggestion that skin is fundamentally a folding medium, within a theory of the enfolding, intermingling bodies in which "Klein bottles are a model of identity," and particularly his description of the skin as textile-like, layered veil seems significant here. However, Serres is reluctant to connect the veil of the skin to sight as revelation, as one might be tempted to do following Siegert's notion of unfolding media. Michel Serres, "Veils," *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley, (London: Continuum, 2008), 22.

⁹ A clear reference to this practice in the creation of practical special-effects prostheses.

accommodate his mouth and eyes. It is these orifices which provide openings into the sheath of the artificial skin, revealing the awkwardly wrinkling, folding prosthetic skin to be completely emptied of visible contents. While Cane is partially skinned by a wide range of substances during his life as invisible man, including water droplets, smoke, and even gallons of human blood hurled onto him by a scientist desperate to reveal his location, it is this latex skin that most fully enacts the image of human as evacuated skin, completely eviscerated of biological filling. This hollow figure is the double of Cane as exposed viscera, which resembles both a man flayed and a man turned inside out, biological matter completely enfolded on itself.

The repeated discourse of the film's characters around invisibility as a journey, or resulting in material absence, resembles the larger tangle of representational concerns situated around the digitally-produced special effects body. Isabel is repeatedly described by the scientists as having "gone away" following her phase-shift, ultimately causing concern that she may have "been away too long" to preserve normal cognitive and behavioral function. Upon awaking from the invisibility procedure, Cane anxiously shouts that his eyelids are missing, until he is reminded by Linda that they are still there and functional, but as invisible coverings are no longer capable of protecting his eyes from the light; later, he tells her he feels like he "isn't there," prompting her to lay a hand on his (completely invisible) chest, as a reassuring reminder of his materiality and presence. The repeated references made of Cane as ghostlike on the part of the scientists—to which Cane replies "ghosts are dead, I'm very much alive"—are echoed in the many scenes in which a fully invisible Cane assumes the makeshift skin of the draped bedsheet, a visual reference to ghostliness associated with children's improvised Halloween costumes. *Hollow Man* responds to these anxieties expressed by its characters—and likely also projected onto the viewer, who is presented with not only a heavily VFX-mediated performance on the part of Bacon, but also with the concept of a central character as visual void—by insisting that materiality will out. The film dwells upon the indentations created in chairs, beds, and pooled liquids on which the invisible man sits or stands, obsessively intercutting footage captured with thermo-imaging cameras, and as I have described, visually foregrounding not the seemingly imperceptible body, but the exposed viscera of a body turned inside out, or the textile-like wrinkling folds of the seemingly eviscerated "hollow" skin.

Conclusion: Towards an Enteric Imaginary

In considering the possible wanderings, interventions, and interfaces of biological matter, I propose extending Elizabeth A. Wilson's spirited defense of the experiential, emotional, and even thoughtful anatomy of the gut to suggest the concept of an enteric imaginary. Such a system could serve as one possible tool for broadening both our understanding of what constitutes possible embodied engagements with the digital beyond simply cognition, as well as what counts as cognition. My concept of the enteric imaginary seeks to trouble the normative ontologies and binaries surrounding the special effects body, and to bring into view new horizons of corporeal relationality and interaction across the different bodies at stake in the context of these effects' production and consumption. In joining the material and the speculative, the enteric imaginary approaches the special effects body as a site of flows and folding enmeshments, opening up the bodies at play in the production and consumption of spectacular effects to a much wider field of possibility, and troubling the boundary lines between aesthetics and the biological, mind and soma, human and nonhuman, meat and technics.

Wilson's advocacy points toward a need for a more distributed picture of biological matter, which becomes important within media studies in considering the separable parts that may interface or merge with the digital, as well as in broadening what 'counts' as a body, within this most embodied of genres and fan communities. Rather than reject the appeals for viscosity called up by fan discourse, I want to broaden what we consider our viscera to be capable of, and open new avenues to consider how all levels and pieces of our biological matter commune with and are informed by the materiality of both digital and analogue media. Instead of disregarding the fan's love for the supposedly greater ontological presence of a practically-mounted gore body, the enteric imaginary puts visceral entanglements of all kinds front and center. It beckons us to approach what is expressly material, and what "matters," in systems which are typically conceived of as invisible or immaterial—both within media and within the body itself. As I have tried to suggest, the experiential, emotive, and image-generating capacities of the enteric system are uniquely suited to explorations of the creation and destruction of special effects bodies, and particularly their consumption within the genre of body horror. By launching investigations into the interactions and entanglements between bodily systems, biological matter, and the larger rhetorics of both analogue and digital

media, perhaps we might more generatively approach both theories of embodiment and media itself “from the other side.”¹⁰

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¹⁰ As part of our commitment to developing scholars doing original work in horror studies, *MONSTRUM* is pleased to collaborate with the Horror Studies Scholarly Interest Group (SIG), part of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), in the selection and publication of this annual prize-winning graduate student essay, selected by a jury of SCMS-SIG scholars and the *MONSTRUM* editors.

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The Audience as Embodied Voyeurs in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*

Laura Hebert

Music thunders to the pumping of a beating heart, footsteps fall in time with the quickening inhale of breaths, and shadows linger uncomfortably. In Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990), the bodily excess displayed through the images on the screen shocks the viewer into a push-pull relationship that is essential to the film's design and content. The harrowing acts and the moments of disturbing perversion draw the audience into a tense, embodied relationship to Bigelow's film. Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis), the focus of the film, is a female police officer, showcasing strength and challenging gender norms as she negotiates a society obsessing over her power. After taking down a robber in a convenience store, Megan finds herself in the role of muse for an unknown killer ravaging the city. This essay focuses on the materiality of Bigelow's filming techniques, such as the use of the telephoto lens, to establish a relational viewership between the viewer and Turner's body that demonstrates the critical potential of voyeurism. Bigelow encourages a productive voyeurism as a template to foreground the issues of power asymmetries under patriarchy, especially through the movement of Megan's body through space and frame.

Blue Steel confronts viewers bluntly with the trials of Megan Turner by fixating on her body and by capturing the conflicts Turner faces with her colleagues, her family and her nemesis, Eugene, as they all question her abilities and obsess over her power. Bigelow brings the audience into the film by creating different planes of focus in the film's imagery, at times forcing Turner's body to the foreground by actively diminishing background detail when she is onscreen. Background characters and landscape therefore are intentionally blurred compared to the crisp definition of the essential presence of Turner. Her surroundings are blurred into submission and she stands dominant within the

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frame. The viewer cannot help but track her movements through the frame and experience her actions alongside her, as her every motion is emphasised through the intensity of Bigelow's focus. The technique forces the viewer to become more implicated in Turner's world of violence, crime and perversion, and experience the struggles with her. The only thing separating the audience from the foregrounding of Turner's harrowing experiences, is the screen, yet this small degree of separation still prevents the viewer from reaching out to aid and comfort her. It is in part this heightened sense of helplessness experienced by the viewer that forces them to become aware of the film medium itself. *Blue Steel* thus plays up the cinema's ability to "convince spectators that the moving image [is], in fact, palpable and dangerous" (1989, 115), as Tom Gunning has argued about the first motion pictures which startled the viewer through the novelty of the medium. *Blue Steel* renews this sense of novelty by highlighting the relationship between viewer and spectator. As the focus of the film, Turner's character is isolated from what is around her. She is one of the only women on the police force and the target of Eugene's disturbed affection, further singling her out from the rest of the characters and drawing the audience's focus, a factor highlighted by Bigelow's obsessive hewing to her. This film demands that the audience members surrender their own control and give in to the voyeuristic fascination that the filming techniques encompass. The viewer cannot act on their desire to aid Turner in her continual isolation (in both content and style) and must instead sit back and endure the experience in the only way they can, through watching her body's movements.

Bigelow's use of tracking shots, matched with her focus on the movement of the characters as they witness moments of surprise, fear and perversion, serve to limit the viewer's experience of a scene. These tracking shots create a sort of tunnel vision for the audience, preventing them from seeing beyond the perspective of a given character, typically Turner. Limiting the audience's knowledge of their surroundings induces the feeling of being trapped, a cinematic claustrophobia that implicates the viewer in the scene's rush of adrenaline. The viewer thus becomes so deeply connected with movement in these scenes because they are not allowed to participate from a cool cognitive distance, but instead become physically invested in the outcome of a given scene. In *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener explain that in newer approaches of understanding a more embodied spectatorship, "the spectator is no longer passively receiving optical information, but exists as a bodily being, enmeshed acoustically, sensorimotorically, somatically and affectively in the film's visual texture and soundscape" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 10). This is true in *Blue Steel*, as the

audience is no longer limited to an experience where images merely support narrative and character, but rather is invited to experience the tactility and sensorial stimulus of the images. Bigelow's filming techniques invite audiences to succumb to a full-body experience filled with tension and anticipation. The film's excessive style leaves the audience with recognizable bodily energy as if they too were packed full of adrenaline on a police chase through New York City.

The lasting effects of *Blue Steel*'s viewing experience are heightened by the excessive use of these techniques and the key themes they display, such as the film's investigation of gender dynamics. For example, when a man enters a scene with Turner, he too becomes enmeshed in the film's acute focus on Turner's world. Additionally, this close adherence to Turner becomes an invasion into Turner's space (in life and in the frame), offsetting Turner's place as the only source of strength in the image; she is now challenged by a male perspective in a power struggle. Along with Eugene, Turner's father and co-workers all confront Turner through abuse, power and control. Bigelow uses a telephoto lens in these scenes to demonstrate an overpowering male perspective. Turner is constantly under the surveillance of the lens's flattened, long distance effect, making her a body under obsessive study. The use of tracking shots both upsets and highlights this power dynamic as well, as it cues the viewer to consider shifts in which character is making the decisions. For example, multiple times throughout the film, Turner leaves a static position in a scene where she occupies the frame with a male character. As she separates herself from the other character, the shot follows her, demonstrating the power she has over the image by forcing it into movement. Bigelow employs this technique to grant primacy of power to Turner, even with the recurring masculine threats of power that enter the frame with her. The film's blocking, camera movement and framing thus challenge the conclusions of traditional gaze theory which see the camera as serving to strip power away to give it to a masculine-identified observer. Philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi states that "power comes up into us from the field of potential" (2015, 20). This 'field of potential' is evident in these scenes as Bigelow assigns Turner the potential to separate herself from the male control trying to dominate her choices, freeing her to make decisions for herself. Bigelow's filming style ensures that the viewer experiences this power struggle alongside Turner, in understanding how she must stay in control of her own situation. Through her telephoto and tracking shots, Bigelow compels the viewer to share in the gendered power dynamics experienced by Turner. While these elements of Bigelow's style are very effective, the planes of focus and perspective used in

this film are not the only techniques used to engage the audience; Bigelow also employs close-up shots inventively to unsettle and disrupt the viewing experience.

Bigelow uses close-ups pervasively throughout the film to establish unsettling, shocking, excessive intimacy with the images. In the opening credit sequence of the film, Bigelow's close-ups fetishize the gun, pointing to the deceptive beauty and power of the phallic object. Bigelow's obsessive focus on the weapon forces it to reveal its excess: it is too sleek, too beautiful, its materiality too perfect. Already, the concepts of control, power and voyeurism are embodied by the images of the gun and announce some of the themes to be further addressed throughout the film. The opening's excessive use of gun footage spawns discomfort. It is rare that an object be so closely and obsessively examined—and instructive in that the opening scene cues the viewer to contemplate the unusual intensity with which the film's images are, and will later be portrayed. This is evident during the sex scene with Turner and one of her colleagues, where close-up images are used to hue closely to the bodies on screen. The uncomfortable closeness of skin and sweat in this scene forces viewers into an acute awareness of their voyeuristic position, which invades the privacy of intimacy and nakedness. The viewer's discomfort during these scenes is created in close-up imagery that recalls the way Bigelow's camera lingers on the gun in the opening sequence. The dynamic relationships between sex, violence, and power all become clear here.

Stephen Shaviro, in a chapter on *Blue Steel*, writes that “such a hypertrophy of the visual” in such moments “is Bigelow's way of undoing the security and possessiveness that have conventionally been associated with the ‘male gaze’” (1993, 8). For Shaviro, Bigelow thus “pushes fetishism and voyeuristic fascination to the point where they explode” (Shaviro 1993, 8). This dynamic can be understood thematically as well through the ‘fetishism and voyeuristic fascination’ that both Eugene and the police force share for Turner, as their interest comes from a position of male perspective and power: Turner is the subject of their relentlessly “male gaze.” The visual techniques employed during the film accentuate this fascination and force it upon the spectator as a way to render the power of this gaze suspect. This technique effectively places the viewer in a position of understanding the implications of possessiveness as they experience the events Turner faces alongside her. As I argue above, Bigelow's use of telephoto lensing and tracking shots that force them into Turner's perspective already are working to unsettle and reveal such power dynamics; the visual fascination at play in these scenes makes the viewer think critically about the film's investigation of gendered forms of power. Bigelow's

style makes viewers hyper-aware that they have agreed to be submitted to an experience that demands they give their power not just to Turner's perspective, but also to the images themselves. This experience can be defined as cinemasochism, which Patricia MacCormack explains requires that "all spectators relinquish their place of power" (2010, 164) and allow for the images to "use" them. The film's disturbing rape scene for example, is difficult to watch and yet the images are so bursting with a visceral magnetism that attracts the attention of the viewer even as the events of the scene repulse. Bigelow refuses the viewer a conventional, comfortable distance from the screen. The movement of characters and the sounds associated with the struggle entangle to prevent the viewer from escaping their presence and present-ness. Whether they cover their eyes or plug their ears in an effort to escape the events on screen, or offer their unimpeded attention, spectators realize they are in a position of vulnerability as witnesses to relentless, disturbing visuality and aurality. The scene thus not only portrays images of Eugene and Turner in a violent struggle for control, but also takes the control away from the viewer.

Just as the gun is fetishized during the opening sequence, Turner's character traits of courage, strength, and independence are also obsessively in focus in the way the gun becomes a potential source of power for her to wield throughout the film. On many occasions, Turner's position as a police officer is critiqued by the men in her life. The resulting doubt Turner feels with regard to her capabilities illustrates an issue of gender within the film. The gun—an embodiment of systemic (masculine) power—is constantly in and out of Turner's possession, it having been taken away from and given to her by men. Thus, Turner's power is restricted, controlled—and defined—by the men around her. A key indicator of this comes when Eugene asks Turner to take out her gun for his own pleasure. Eugene's response to Turner wielding a gun is obsessive and is rooted in a place of heterosexual male fantasy surrounding female power. This scene in the film is a turning point for Turner as it also comes with her realization that Eugene is an obsessed murderer. The wielding of Turner's gun is initially in loose, shaky hands and controlled by Eugene's desires. However, as Turner's understanding of her situation shifts so does her intention in wielding the gun. Turner takes back control of the scene, holding the gun in a position of strength and power, without wavering. But it is more in her posture than in the weapon itself that power can be sourced in this moment. The gun becomes a tool that is merely a conduit for Turner's power. The very stature of Turner's body in these images reveals to the viewer the ability that the body holds in conveying potential. Linda Williams explains this type of scene to allow for the shifting of "viewer identification [...] from an 'abject terror

gendered feminine’ to an active power with bisexual components” (Williams 1991, 7). This change in Turner’s posture and treatment of the gun can be seen as her mastery of both the female and male powers in the film. As *Blue Steel* progresses, Turner retains this sense of “active power” as she dedicates her time to convicting Eugene.

Horror films, which Williams explains are a type of body genre, generally depict an excess of violence and “the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (1991, 4). This can be seen in the last sequence of *Blue Steel*, where Turner finally captures Eugene and shoots him. Turner is fulfilling the role of the “final girl—which (in a bit of allusive, intertextual casting) Jamie Lee Curtis herself played in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978)—where a female character finds revenge on a male abuser in a Western-like face off. Curtis was one of the original “final girls” and became an icon for female power in film as she continued to emulate this character type throughout her career in works such as *Blue Steel*. The final scenes of this film essentially grant Turner with the power she has been fighting for throughout the narrative. After Eugene’s death, Turner experiences a sudden deflation of energy, her emotions having been so intense throughout the film that her body collapses from an overdose of sensation. Bigelow demonstrates the effect through the slow-motion, close-up drop of the gun Turner used to kill Eugene onto the car seat beside her. The gun is finally out of Turner’s grasp and whatever power that came along with it has exited her body, leaving her to succumb to the pain she has endured. The final images of the film show Turner slumped in her seat, with her head bowed and her eyes lowered as she is carried out of the car in an epilogue that continues in slow-motion.

The shocking events of violence, murder, rape and abuse that take place throughout *Blue Steel* startle the spectator and produce affect, the capacity to be affected and to affect something else in return (Massumi, 2015). When spectators watch a film, they are relationally affected by its materiality; they are being shocked audio-visually. When Turner is shot by Eugene, the materiality of the gunshot wound alarms the spectator. Turner’s body is thrown backwards in excessive slow motion as blood sprays excessively from the bullet wound in her shoulder. The slow motion used in this scene painfully lengthens the duration for which the spectator must witness Turner’s pain. The effect draws out the potential for the audience to feel elongated stress with the female protagonist, as their perspective is intertwined with hers. Another example of this extended duration of affect is when Turner is being choked by Eugene as he shoots her friend. Once again, the scene is portrayed through slow-motion, highlighting the power struggle, and accentuating the viewer’s experience of

helplessness and anger at witnessing such a disturbing action taking place. Moreover, the camera accentuates Eugene's control over Turner by shooting at an upward angle on Turner's anguished face. There is the sense of Eugene as an unstoppable murderer towering over Turner as the gun he wields is pointed directly at the camera, violating the audience's safety in both their alignment with Turner and in directly addressing them, exposing their position as witnesses in the dark. Again, the viewer has agreed to be submitted to an experience that demands they give their power to the images themselves, highlighting the voyeuristic excesses of the film once more. Neither of these scenes features any dialogue; it is rather the camera angles, movement, close-ups and blocking of the scene that produces affect.

Through excessive slow-motion, whether it be the spraying of blood or the reaching for a gun in an image, Bigelow's film encourages spectators to respond viscerally to what they are witnessing, as their attention is fixed on the onscreen bodies and materiality of the medium. As Shaviro notes, it can be understood that "the disjunction between speech and image" in such moments "reflects the incapacity of language [...] to abolish and replace appearance" (Shaviro 1993, 29). The body experiences knowledge that language often fails to express. In such scenes, more can be inferred through a reaction to a visceral stimulus than one solely expressed through language. Bigelow's images are most effective at affectively immersing spectators in the materiality of the film, rather than allowing them the comfortable oblivion that they are watching from a distance. The movement of red blood spewing from a gun wound demands the spectator's attention. Similarly, the clawing of desperate hands and the writhing of bodies calls for focus on the screen itself. Excess in violence, pleasure and emotions are typical of body genres such as horror, pornography and melodrama (Williams 1991, 12). In *Blue Steel*, excess in the violence associated with horror focuses on the bodies on the screen and stimulates the audience's senses. An example of the horror body genre coming to life in this film is during the scene where Eugene is bathing in the blood of one of his victims. In a shockingly slow, close-up image, Eugene smears the crimson fluid across his naked body in a disturbing act of sadism that, once again, the audience is forced to experience in uncomfortable proximity. This scene appeals directly to all the senses, as the colour of the blood, the eerie music and the imagined iron-like scent of blood induce feelings of disgust and fear within the audience. In terms of body genres, this scene is successful as horror, because it can be "measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (Williams 1991, 4). In this scene, the viewer may gag or shudder due to the complete disregard for human life and the sanctity of the body. The viewer

may even experience an itching sensation of blood running over their own skin, the smooth, rich fluid dripping across their bare flesh. This sensation supports the theories discussed by Elsaesser and Hagener that “skin is a sense organ and touch is a means of perception, from which follows an understanding of cinema as a tactile experience [and] one that grants the eye ‘haptic’ faculties” (2010, 10). This scene succeeds in invading the vulnerability of the spectators’ skin by invoking this unpleasant response to the horror on screen.¹

Another grotesque example of the capacity of blood to affect the audience is when Eugene pulls out the bullet from his arm. Again, close-up shots are used to focus on the blood and gore while a slurping, sucking sound rushes into the eardrums of the spectators as the bullet is removed. The pairing of disturbing sounds and vivid visuals of the breaking of skin creates a traumatic sensorial experience for the audience. These examples of excessive violence may be vexing and difficult to watch; however, their images are presented in such a way that one cannot help but become hypnotized by the combination of sound and motion on screen. The events are so startling and disturbing that a reaction of the spectator to the actions of the bodies on screen, forces a deep relationship and understanding to be formed between film and viewer. Tom Gunning explains that at the core of early attraction cinema there lies “a series of visual shocks” (Gunning 1989, 116), understood by the “uncanny and agitating power they [early films] exerted on the audience” (1989, 116). In early cinema, these moments were central to grabbing the audience’s attention and pulling them into the film far more than language, yet genres such as horror sustain this shocking aspect of early films. Bigelow relies on distressing and horrific events to affect the audience in a similar way. The visual shocks within *Blue Steel* force discomfort to be experienced by the audience members. This in turn strengthens the relationship between film and spectator, creating sympathy for the victims, respect for Turner and fear for Eugene.

Bigelow’s film *Blue Steel* invokes a visual fascination within the audience in its inventive use of lenses, focus, camera movement and speed, and emphasis on materiality within the scene. This fascination is presented through excess of such stylistic features, and a close adherence to bodies that startles the viewer into experiencing new perspectives and new understandings of the essence of the film’s themes, including the challenging of gender stereotypes. Voyeurism—

¹ Blood is displayed in excess in this scene, and the display of violence in slow-motion underlines the development of the horror genre alongside the western. This slow-motion dance of violence is exemplified by the shooting style in Sam Peckinpah’s *Wild Bunch* (1969), for example.

and the viewers' awareness of their own role in it—stirs discomfort and curiosity within the audience as images are examined in intense detail, accentuated by close-up imagery, augmented planes of focus, and extended slow-motion. Bigelow keeps focus, perspective and materiality in constant motion to highlight the power dynamics between Turner's body and those of the masculine bodies around her. The film appeals to all of the senses, its images of violence and terror stimulating unpleasant bodily reactions in the spectator. *Blue Steel* is thus a film embodying the search for female power in a patriarchal society, where strength is found within the movement and central placement of Megan Turner's body.²

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² This essay was written for the course, "The Cinematic Body," taught by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare at John Abbott College in the fall of 2019.

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***Moby-Dick*: The Incomprehensible Monstrosity of the Whale**

Patrick Charles Poulin

In one of the theses in his essay “Monster Culture: Seven Theses,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster is “the Harbinger of Category Crisis” (1996, 6). He defines monsters as resistant towards categorization and classification, and as forces that resist and frustrates our desire to understand things through purely rational means. Herman Melville’s classic philosophical take on nautical adventure, *Moby-Dick* (1851), is, among many other things, an extended treatment of the monster’s shift, ambiguous and incomprehensible nature. The novel’s titular whale is a monolithic force that evades our understanding, as it “resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition” (Cohen 7). Like the monster figure Cohen discusses, Moby Dick is a hybrid concept; it cannot be understood only through biological classification or rational thought. Melville forces us to come to terms with the sublime and overwhelming nature of the whale’s semiotic elusiveness through his scientific digressions, his discussion of the whale’s sublime whiteness, and his presentation of its massive and pervasive *physical* presence in the final chase. While the novel’s sudden and jarring shifts into documentary discussions of the practical and rational elements of the whale as a biological entity disturb us because of their lack of closure or of complete understanding, Melville’s descriptions of the whale’s whiteness in particular haunt us because of their contradictory implications, with whiteness taking on paradoxical meanings so maddeningly ambiguous as to induce terror. More complex still, Melville does not leave his whale stranded in the realm of pure idea. Moby Dick’s appearance in physical form at the end of the novel depicts awesome sublimity through not just his dread-inducing immanence, but also his enormous physical *embodiment* and *presence*. Together, these elements present an idea of monstrous category crisis in that the whale is endlessly ambiguous and polysemic, is impossible to

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classify empirically, and resists comprehensive understanding in its many symbolic roles, from mythical leviathan, to bringer of fate, to random embodiment of nature.

Moby-Dick has multiple chapters that are laden with purely empirical information, but Melville's objective facts about whales are only elusively straightforward. These chapters are spread out throughout the novel, initially seeming almost random in their placement, and often disrupting the course of the narrative of Ahab's mad quest to destroy the whale that dismembered him. However, the placement of these chapters is of acute significance, particularly when one considers their contextual juxtaposition with the chapters around them. Cohen writes, "In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble," suggesting that monstrosity not only is independent of classification and understanding, but can actively undermine it (1996, 7). Melville's novel supports this, as the placement of his empirical tangents suggests a profound lack, or ever-widening circle, in what empirical observation can capture. Chapter 61, for example, "Stubb Kills a Whale," combines elements of both adventure and philosophy. Narrator Ishmael indulges in heavy romantic ideology, such as his observation that "in that dreamy mood losing all consciousness, at last my soul went out of my body" (Melville 220). Immediately following his musings, the crew engage in an exciting chase after a whale (Melville 220). Three chapters later, "Stubb's Supper" is a deeply disturbing chapter that reflects on the nature of death and power, as Stubb eats the whale he killed previously, by light of a lamp fueled by whale oil. Yet, only four chapters after Ishmael's romantic musings and the crew's exhilarating kill, and only a single chapter after the disturbing chapter about supper, Melville decides to spend chapter 65 explaining the practical details of how the whale can be used "as a dish," lending both culinary and historical knowledge to what has previously been an ironic commentary on Stubb's act. After a section boasting such heavy philosophical and moral implications, there is something chillingly, ironically incomplete about such clear-cut descriptive passages as "three centuries ago the tongue of the Right Whale was esteemed a great delicacy in France," or "[i]n the case of a small Sperm Whale the brains are accounted to a fine dish" (Melville 230, 231). In the wake of the previous chapters demonstrating romantic and transcendental ideas of deep thinking, forcing us to consider the ironies we live by, what our place in the world is, and perhaps even to question whether God and divinity exist (and all the while encouraging the reader somehow to think *Moby Dick* might embody them), these matter-of-fact passages about cooking whales arrive with shockingly misplaced (oversimplified) clarity. This factual information, though

seemingly an attempt to better know the whale in all its facets from mythical to practical, is placed in a way that makes the juxtaposition feel unfulfilling—even wrong-headed—and highlights Ishmael’s inability to do more than touch the surface of the deeper ideas also at play. Chapter 65, “The Whale As a Dish,” and the many others like it, read quite like documentaries, but, despite their assuredness of tone and pretensions to complete coverage, they disturb in their inability to encompass a comprehensive truth. Through these juxtapositions, Melville is tearing down the hermeneutic circle, showing that it is impossible to completely know that which we seek to know by sticking doggedly to one framework, and that, even through multiple fields of study, the truth or essence of something may never be fully understood. The whale thus becomes not only a biological entity, not only the source of Ahab’s rage, not only a mythical presence, and not only an incomprehensible idea—but all of these. Melville clearly understands narrative structure and form, experimenting with and in some cases subverting these concepts in order to underscore the monster’s elusive thematic nature. The novel thus becomes less about elusive meaning than about the problem of representation. Melville even writes later on in the book, in a similarly factual chapter about the whale’s tail, “Dissect him how I may, then, but I go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (283). Here Melville offers an upfront critique of empirical understanding, but his juxtapositions of similar empirically-driven chapters further complicates the limitations of all schools of understanding.

While Melville’s digressions into the realm of studied knowledge and objective rationality hint at the unknowability of Moby-Dick, his motif of whiteness suggests its contradictory, even paradoxical nature. In *Dive Deeper* (2012), his chapter-by-chapter analysis of, and commentary on, *Moby-Dick*, George Cotkin writes that white is “a color of dualisms” (2012, 81). Its many implications suggest a sort of war within the colour, in that its very nature contradicts itself and that it means multiple things that do not seem like they could coexist. In chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Melville’s Ishmael ‘dives deep’ into the contradictory nature of Moby Dick’s iconic hue, and the many conflicting implications it connotes. Early on in the chapter, Melville writes, “in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty” (151). He then goes on to describe how, in objects such as pearls, the colour white is an embodiment of beauty. However, as Cotkin points out, “whiteness can represent a danger to ships, in the form of icebergs” (82). Off on this nautical adventure, white should be nothing but utterly terrifying, but somehow, as this chapter’s musing suggests, it is still perceivable as beautiful. Ishmael is careful in his deliberations to highlight the polysemic permutations of what he calls this

“colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink” (157). Whiteness is utterly sublime; it is an indication of danger but also a distinction of beauty, somehow both sinister and pure; it is horrifying but inviting.

As indicated in the reference above to a simultaneous fullness and absence of color, another important contradiction implied by the whiteness of the whale revolves around the nature of colour itself. According to the science of optics, white is the simultaneous presence of all colours—similarly, one could say, to how Moby Dick’s whiteness, and the whale itself, are the simultaneous presence of multiple and often conflicting ideas. In the physics of optics and reflection, the colour white also reflects all colours that hit it, just as Moby Dick reflects all ideas that are projected onto it. For the monomaniac Ahab, the whale is redemption and vengeance. Ishmael writes that “all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (Melville 148). For the dreamy, romantic Ishmael, who writes “The Whiteness of the Whale” chapter as a counterpoint to Ahab’s own viewpoint, the whale is a beautiful, terrible figure of transcendent wonder and awe. Yet, whiteness is also heavily associated with invisibility, transparency, and a *lack* of colour. A blank canvas or *page*, for example, waiting to be filled with colour, is white. The paradoxical simultaneity of white as both absence of colour and the presence of all colours at once is an overwhelming prospect. In this way, while white is fullness it is also lack. Ishmael comments on this idea of colour as well, writing, “[t]hough in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright” (156). If whiteness is both complete colour and lack thereof, then this passage suggests that whiteness, in both complete visibility and invisible intangibility, represents both love and fright, as Melville intentionally plays with binary phrasing. The passage also suggests, by hinting at the ‘invisible spheres’ of our world, that there are things we cannot perceive or know, or perhaps are afraid of knowing, despite our desire to. Melville here suggests that beneath or behind the visible world, that which we can comprehend, there is a lurking sense of another, darker reality—an invisible one that pricks at our awareness as a kind of niggling essential lack, that which is unknowable.

These invisible spheres could perhaps be similar to what Cohen refers to in his seven theses on the monster, when he writes that, “The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself” (1996, 7). The uncertainties and contradictions surrounding the whiteness of the titular whale challenge the hermeneutic circle, and the invisible spheres of its tempting truth (or truthiness)—that unknowable

nature which we fear so deeply. Moby Dick's whiteness both encourages analysis and resists—even confounds—solutions, placing the whale as a monstrous metaphysical force that exists on the edge of meaning. The monster is framed as an object to be read. “The monstrous body is pure culture,” writes Cohen (1996, 4). “A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read” (Cohen 1996, 4). But in its place as a ‘harbinger of category crisis’, it also exists to frustrate reading, to resist easy signification and/or representation. As Ishmael presents it, the whale’s polysemy—its embodiment of so many contradictions—renders it an unreadable symbol, defined only by its lack of definition, its indefinability. Within these negative hermeneutics where the monster lives, binary (indeed, all) classificatory systems collapse, and the idea of comprehensive understanding and complete knowledge dissolve.

It is important to consider that after chapter upon chapter of developing the elusive, mysterious nature of Moby Dick as discussed in the two previous paragraphs, Melville does eventually place the crew—and by extension the reader—face to face with the whale, giving him shape and embodiment within the novel’s physical realm. The novel’s last three chapters, constituting an extended chase of Moby Dick that occurs over three days, can be read as deeply disturbing, in that Melville is attempting to make the whale that much more terrifying by assigning a sudden, ubiquitous, massive *embodiment* to that which has so far existed solely in the realm of suggestion. This emphasis on physicality is essential in understanding the sublimity and elusive monstrosity of Moby Dick, because seeing the whale as a tangible, concrete being is terrifying in that its physical grandeur becomes yet another factor of the novel’s deconstruction of categorical thinking. While the essential nature of Moby Dick—whether one sees him as mythical being, physical monster, or pure idea—remains obscure throughout the novel, the final chase gives him form and identity, almost making him a comprehensive entity in his sheer thundering physicality. Arguably, its physical presence adds another paradoxical signification to the whale, maintaining, even exacerbating its ever-elusive meaning. As if to disseminate the physical embodiment of the whale into esotericism, Ishmael uses heavily romantic and religious language upon first sighting the whale, noting that “A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale” as “he so divinely swam” (Melville 392). These descriptions are similar to the ideas brought about earlier in the novel, as they still hint at something larger that is not seen; that is, they continue to endow the whale with a romantic sense of mystery, even as they are almost immediately followed by description of the hard physical reality of Moby Dick’s immensity. Melville writes that Moby Dick was “still withholding from sight the full terrors

of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wretched hideousness of his jaw” (392). Here Melville makes reference to the great, overwhelming power of the whale, which yet remains undiscovered—still a part of the lurking, unfathomable deep. Finally, when the whale emerges at long last, it is said that, “the grand god revealed himself” (Melville 393), implying that this is truly a being of immense and terrifying power and scale whose appearance creates shock and awe rather than sudden clarity or comprehensive certainty. These depictions of the whale are an attempt to physically ground it, but as the romantic ideologies of Ishmael are undying, so too is Moby Dick’s polysemic wonder—for, as discussed earlier, Moby Dick reflects back all that is projected onto him. This can be especially seen in a passage from the third day of the chase, when Ishmael describes the whale’s ferocity as so destructive that “Moby Dick seemed combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven” (Melville 406). This passage’s references to fallen angels can mean two things, both of which have vastly different implications but simultaneously support the idea that Moby Dick’s monstrosity resists classification. The first interpretation is that Moby Dick’s presence cannot be described physically, and as such his descriptions fall into yet another realm, that of the supernatural. The second is that these elusions to religion are Melville’s way of painting Moby Dick as a sublime figure that depicts humanity’s insignificance within the grand scope of nature.

The first of these implications is that Ishmael is unable to fully explain the whale within the confines of the physical realm; thus, he turns to supernature, and the divine. Moby Dick’s intensity and vengeance, and perhaps even the fury of nature itself in this context, is so terrifying and so powerful that it cannot be physically described. The language used instead, particularly angels and possession, implies that this fury lies in the realm of the supernatural. If the monster lives on the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle, as Cohen suggests, then there is no better example than this. That is, even in Melville’s driving action scene, full of movement and excitement; even when the whale is tangible, concrete, and situated in physical space; even in the moment where its identity should be the most clear—it still remains elusive in its overwhelming *presence*. The implications here are terrifying, as Moby Dick not only resists binary classification in terms of symbolic significance, but even in terms of embodiment itself. The whale refuses to exist in a single realm. Even when it is pulled out of the metaphorical and into the physical, it slips away into the supernatural, forever resisting attempts to pin it down, implying the coexistence of different existential planes. Another way to read this passage is through the lens of the sublime. The sublime, in Kantian terms, attends a kind of crisis in

confronting that which cannot be measured or understood. It is in part the encounter of our own limitations in the face of unfathomability—an object, event, or concept that “cannot be contained in any sensible form” (Kant, quoted in Shaw 2017, 105)—that renders something sublime. David B. Johnson, writing on Jean Francois Lyotard (himself following Kant closely), describes this as “the *presentation of the unrepresentable*” (2012, 120), and notes the “generative” (121) rather than stultifying nature of the sublime’s “humbling failure of the imagination before reason” (120). This recalls Cohen’s theory of category crisis, as it implies that which is so grand (or pure, or total) it cannot fit into our cognitive or epistemological nets. A common trope in the sublime is the depiction of the insignificance of man against the immensity of nature. Thus, in his first and only real appearance in the novel, Moby Dick’s power to affect remains in his immensity and unfathomability—so much so that Ishmael must describe him as teetering on the liminal space between the physical and metaphysical realm. The sublime is also present in the passages from earlier on in the paragraph, which describe the whale’s horrors that lay below the surface of the ocean and compare its grandeur to God. The passage referring to angels also evokes the sublime in another way, in that the monster is so grand and awe-inspiring that it forces Ishmael to push past the physical description of Moby Dick—so much so that his appearance becomes an afterthought, as even when Moby Dick breaches in one of the final chapters we still don’t get a sense of what he looks like in his entirety. While this is to be expected, as Ishmael’s experimental narrative juxtaposes all sorts of rhetorical strategies, including Romantic musings, it is still interesting to consider that Moby Dick’s physical presence is so terrifying that it necessitates a parallel to something that transcends physical reality. Moby Dick’s (meta-)physical immensity paradoxically calls into question his concrete form, and instead invites a more supernatural, metaphysical, or metaphorical reading. If the sublime is to be defined as feelings of awe from the grand vastness or moving beauty of nature, then Moby Dick’s physical immensity inviting deeper or more esoteric speculation surely evokes this.

The Kantian sublime, particularly in regards to the idea of fallen angels and religious imagery, also connects to another thesis of Cohen’s which I have not yet explored fully. Typically, feelings of the sublime will be a combination of fear and wonder. As Cohen writes in his sixth thesis, titled “Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire,” monsters are “creatures who terrify and interdict [but] can evoke potent escapist fantasies” (1996, 17). In this way, there is clearly a parallel to be drawn between the monstrous and the sublime. Moby Dick in himself is, in many ways, fantasy-inducing, because of his resistance to

being caught, either physically or figuratively, in our epistemological “nets.” Ishmael describes Moby Dick’s fury as being possessed by angels who fell from heaven. To link Moby Dick primarily to a mere moral or immoral force would be too simply an expression of fear and darkness, whereas to describe the fury as indicative of fallen angels implies a purity and goodness that has been lost. The sublimity of this passage comes in its combinations of purity, deep wrath and fear, and our desire to confront such an object. Ishmael resists configuring Moby Dick as a kind of hammer of the gods, a moral police-monster, instead loading his angel metaphor with the same *amoral* ambiguities as the colour white. That Moby Dick is portrayed as both immensely embodied yet also ethereal when he is actually physically encountered at the end of the novel further establishes the idea that the monster complicates classification schemes, as the use of supernatural language and the exploration of the sublime cause a binary conflict for things like reality, realms of existence, physical nature, religion, fear, divinity and morality.

Through an inability to capture complete essence via rational knowledge, an exploration into the contradictory nature of Moby Dick’s iconic whiteness, and an array of complex implications from the characters physically encountering the great whale, Melville’s literary monster (his whale and his novel) anticipates Cohen’s idea that the monster brings category crisis and resists classification. Though Melville presents a near-compendium of information that should make the whale knowable and understandable—teaching us its anatomy, its place in history, its uses in culinary practices, its symbolic importance in religion literature, and myth, and so much more—the whale, like its signature hue, resists categorization. Melville shows that any attempt to understand the monster will innately result in the breakdown of classificatory schemes, as he essentially mocks the human quest for infinite knowledge as much as he valorizes Ishmael’s attempts to ‘present the unrepresentable’. He presents the monster as an essential lack, at the center of another compelling yet elusive reality, a metaphysical one that resists physical tangibility and our attempts to understand it. Even the musings on the nature of the whale are in themselves an attempt to understand it, as chapter 42 begins with, “What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (Melville 151). This particular passage suggests that the chapter on whiteness is almost a desperate attempt to understand the whale, as if its colour is all that can define it, yet definition still does not come, as the many implications of the whiteness only serve to make Moby Dick more incomprehensible. The whale exudes sublimity in its polysemy. It refuses to mean only one thing, and enticingly means all things. It requires “nonbinary

polymorphism” (Cohen 1996, 7). Melville’s uses the novel’s experimental, associative structure, juxtaposing different epistemological methods, the confounding motif of whiteness, and the multiple implications of the whale’s physical presence to challenge the fundamentalist modes we employ in seeking to understand our reality. In presenting his titular whale as a concept and an event that is too hybrid, too multiple, and too immense to yield itself to science, or religion, or artistic rendering, he encourages the power of sublimation as a way of understanding *something* of the human relationship to nature (and the cosmos). Melville simultaneously appeals to and repulses our desire for seeking truth and essences. In his elusive white whale, all possible interpretations coexist. Melville wants us to reconsider how we think about knowledge, because the monster is, after all, “a revolution in the very logic of meaning” (Cohen 7).¹

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