THE REPRESENTATION OF FANDOM IN *SUPERNATURAL*

By

Stergiani Nenou

Master’s Program in English and American Studies

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

Department of Philosophy
School of English
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Thessaloniki, Greece
Abstract

For over a decade now, Supernatural has been the longest running fantasy TV show on television non-stop. Its cult following has slowly but steadily risen, exploding this small horror show into stardom, with a major fanbase supporting it. My thesis will examine how Supernatural’s fandom is represented in the show, and how the rich dynamic between the producers and the fans have shaped the narrative of the show. The fandom community is a creative community that takes its raw material from cultural entertainment and shapes it into something creative and innovative, thus showing its affection for the initial product. Through the findings of a survey I have conducted and distributed through social media to fans of the show, I aim to demonstrate how the portrayal of fandom culture in the narrative of the show has aided in representing fans in a positive manner. Following, among others, Henry Jenkins’s theoretical approach of convergence culture and participatory culture, I examine how fan practices interact with the text, and how the show interacts with its fans by incorporating them in their canon. The result is a trusted environment for the fans to come forward with their creative ideas, and safe enough to develop their identities while engaging in pop culture practices. I conclude that fans are not “couch potatoes” pressing buttons on a remote, rather they engage actively with a cultural text. Televisual cultural commodities are no longer just moving images, they are a thread in the fabric of our cultural inheritance. Proper representation of fandom culture matters, because fans are the keepers and carriers of all past and present cultural phenomena.
Acknowledgements

Since this is the closest I will ever get to a ‘thank you’ speech, I would like to thank first and foremost Professor Kokonis for his guidance and advice. I want to also extend my deepest gratitude to Professors Rapatzikou and Desilla for their suggestions and consultations that helped me immensely. Moreover, the school of English, for giving me the freedom to write about something dear to me. Special thanks to my family and friends for supporting me and listening to my non-stop rambles day and night. Most importantly to my dear sister, who inspires me without even knowing it. Vivi, this thesis is as much yours as it is mine. And of course, a big thank you and a shout-out to the Supernatural family that answered when I called for them. But above all, to “one ex-blood junkie, one dropout with six bucks to his name, and Mr. Comatose over there. Team Free Will.” Thank you boys. Here’s to fourteen seasons and more.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... i

Acknowledgments ......................................................................................... ii

Epigraph .......................................................................................................... v

Introduction .................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE

“The Road So Far” - What Exactly is Supernatural? ......................... 3

1.1 A Brief Summary of the Seasons So Far ........................................... 3

1.2 Two Brothers Fighting for Humanity and for Each Other.............. 8

1.3 “The Little Show That Could”: Supernatural as Cult TV ............. 13

CHAPTER TWO

A Brief Overview of Fandom ................................................................. 17

The Politics of Postmodern Theory in Audiences ............................... 19

2.1 The Frankfurt School ................................................................. 19

2.2 Postmodernism and the death of the author ............................... 22

2.3 Pastiche, Hyperconsciousness and the Narrative ..................... 25

2.4 Ideology and the Modes of Production ....................................... 29

CHAPTER THREE

Participatory Culture and Textual Poaching ..................................... 33

3.1 Power Dynamics Between Fans and Producers ....................... 37
3.2 “There are Sam-girls and Dean-girls” ........................................ 38

3.3 Becky, the Super-Fan ................................................................. 40

3.4 “The Girl with the Dungeons and the Dragons Tattoo” ............... 43

3.5 “Why would anybody want to watch our lives?” ..................... 44

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 “Fan Fiction” and Audience Response ....................................... 46

4.2 Audience Response .................................................................. 50

Epilogue ......................................................................................... 57

Works Cited .................................................................................... 59
“Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole.”

Dean Winchester, *Supernatural*, “Pilot”
**Introduction**

Fans and aficionados of cultural commodities have just started getting attention from academia the past few years. The practices and habits of fans have long been criticized in a negative way, demeaning them into a group of mindless followers, manipulated by the culture industry. In recent years, approaches such as these have been deemed elitist and dismissed by scholars who, with their research, have tried to shed some light on this colorful group of people, trying to interpret them. Whereas academic research has helped pave the way into an understanding of what fandom culture is, the same commodity that depends on its fanbase in order to succeed, has made little progress in understanding and fully accepting its fans. Images of roaring teenage girls still dominate everyone’s mentality when the word ‘fans’ comes to mind.

However, the fantasy television show *Supernatural* that has been running for the past fourteen years now, starting in 2005, is known to having fully embraced its fanbase. What is more, not only has it broken the ‘fourth wall’ of television between narrative and viewer, it should be seen as metanarrative in its own right. Various episodes refer to *Supernatural’s* fandom in the show itself, extending fan knowledge, inside jokes, and the self-referential content of its canon. The 200th episode titled “Fan Fiction” is the latest, and, in my opinion, the most successful endeavor of the producers to reflect on the importance the fans have played in the show, and thus display not only respect towards the fanbase, but also one of the most accurate and carefully defined images of what fandom stands for.

As a cultural product, this particular episode was anticipated to create controversy and of course not to please all the fans. Through the means of an
experimental research, I have conducted a questionnaire asking of the opinion of a large number of fans, as well as of their own interpretation of their favorite show, and how faithful or discriminatory they believe it is. The views expressed in the thesis come both from the findings of my survey and personal experience as a fan of *Supernatural* for the past twelve years.

In this thesis, I will argue that the correct representation of fandom culture inside its own commodity, helps to establish a healthy image of what fandom is and what it does, dissolving the stereotypes that persist on defining fans as loners with social integration problems. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, and Chris Barker, have combated all views that wish to perpetuate the idea that audiences are apathetic and uninvolved individuals. Reviewing the ideology surrounding fan culture beginning from Marxist perspectives to current ones, I analyze how the postmodern theory of bricolage, pastiche, hyperconsciousseness and intertextuality not only shape the identity of a fan, but also their communication with the text. These practices facilitate to an active understanding of fandom within cultural studies, since they redefine old notions of what a fan is and shed a light on fan practices that would not be feasible, if it were not for the audience’s active participation. Through these theories I seek to understand the role of the fan and change the way they are perceived.

Fans are not byproducts of an economic exchange, rather they are curators of current popular culture. As caretakers of popular commodities, they are the ones who preserve and eventually will communicate cultural products to future generations. Fans are responsible for cultural inheritance and they deserve to be properly represented within the cultural context they belong to.
CHAPTER ONE

“The Road So Far” - What Exactly is Supernatural?

1.1 A Brief Summary of the Seasons So Far

Everyone thinks they know what a fan is. An individual obsessed with a TV show, a celebrity, a sports team, a band or a film. Someone who can quote entire chapters, verses or quotes by heart, and occasionally is seen wearing attire that discloses their favorite fandom. However, before I delve into the terminology and practices of fans, I believe it would be beneficial to give an overview of the TV show Supernatural, I use as my case study, so there will be a reference point for the close reading of the episodes that will follow.

For most people, September 13 is just another day on the calendar. For fans of the TV show Supernatural is where it all began. September 13 was announced back in 2006 the official Supernatural Day at San Diego Comic Con, the biggest and most well-known comic convention worldwide (Ashley n.p.). Created by Eric Kripke, its plot centers around two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester (played by Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki respectively), travelling around the American country in their black 1967 Chevrolet Impala, hunting monsters, ghosts, vengeful spirits, demons, and other supernatural entities.

I will give a brief overview of the first five seasons of the TV show, and a short summary for seasons six to thirteen. Seasons one to five are pivotal since this is where the basic narrative arc is created. Moreover, at the end of season five creator Eric Kripke leaves the show, which marks a turning point in the narrative and the fans, many claiming that these first five seasons should be considered the golden age of Supernatural.
The “Pilot” of the show, which aired on September 13, 2005, introduces the main characters and reveals their tragic backstory. The protagonists’ mother was murdered twenty-two years ago by a demon when Dean was only four and Sam six months old. Raised by their father, John, an ex-Marine Vietnam veteran1 they grow up to become hunters, traveling around the country rescuing people from supernatural forces. Many of their cases involve American urban legends and folklore. The plot of the “Pilot” begins with Dean visiting Sam, the latter having left the family ‘business’ to study law in Stanford, as he needs his help locating their father who has gone missing after following a lead on a case. After solving the case their father was working on (a female ghost that has been luring men to their deaths), Sam returns to his university life, only to find his girlfriend murdered in the exact same way his mother was, engulfed in flames and pinned to the ceiling. Once again Dean saves him and persuades Sam to “pick up where [their father] left off; saving people, hunting things, the family business”2 (“Wendigo”).

During its first season, Supernatural deals with the brothers’ quest to find their father and the demon that killed their mother. Each episode is constructed with “A Monster of the Week” theme that also contains clues for the overarching narrative theme. In the first season, the brothers travel around the country hunting monsters and searching for their father. It is revealed that Sam has psychic powers passed on to him by Azazel, the demon who killed their mother.

During the second season, after an attempt on the Winchesters’ lives by demons, John sells his soul to Azazel and dies in his effort to save Dean who is critically wounded. The brothers continue travelling and hunting demons, while

---

1 In episode 2.09 “Croatoan,” Dean mentions that his father had served as a corporal in the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, Echo Company.
2 This serves as the unofficial motto of the Winchester family throughout the series, that has been adopted by fans as well.
locating and helping others who possess the same psychic abilities with Sam. In the final episodes, Sam is killed by someone with the same abilities as his, while trying to prevent him from opening the Gates of Hell. Dean follows John’s footsteps, sells his soul to a crossroads demon so that he brings Sam back. The brothers manage to kill Azazel with the help of John’s spirit who has escaped Hell, but the opening of the Gates has revealed an army of demons who invade the Earth.

In the third season, we find out that Dean only has one year to live before he is taken to Hell. With the help of a demon named Ruby, Sam tries to find a way to get Dean out of the deal, but to no avail. Lilith, the first demon created by Lucifer, holds Dean’s contract and tries to start the Biblical Apocalypse at the same time by breaking the 66 seals. The boys’ attempts to save Dean are ineffective, Dean dies, and his soul is taken to Hell.

The fourth season, in an iconic opening, finds Dean buried alive, digging his way out of his grave. He is rescued by an angel named Castiel (played by Misha Collins), who will be their helper in the following seasons. After the brothers’ emotional reunion, they get back on the road hunting monsters, while also trying to stop Lilith. Under Ruby’s influence Sam has started drinking demon’s blood and his powers have grown stronger. When he finally confronts Lilith and kills her, he finds out that he was part of a master plan all along. Ruby, working with Lilith, has manipulated Sam into killing her, as she was the final seal, and her death has unlocked Lucifer from his cage, helping him escape from Hell.

The fifth season finds the brothers trying to stop the Apocalypse and lock Lucifer back into his cage. One of the most emotional seasons of the show, it

---

3 Season 3 is the shortest of all the seasons so far, containing only 16 episodes instead of the 22 every show normally has. This was due to the 2007-2008 strike by the Writers Guild Association of America.
highlights the strong brotherly love between the Winchesters, and touched upon the notions of free will versus choice. Dean is Sam’s “weakness, and the bad guys know it too” (“Mystery Spot”). It is revealed that the Winchesters are the human vessels for the Archangel Michael and Lucifer respectively, needing to accept this responsibility, so the Apocalypse can be stopped. When they refuse to play by Heaven’s rules, the angels resurrect Adam, the half-brother the boys never knew they had, to be Michael’s vessel in the place of Dean. Playing by their own rules, the Winchesters, with the help of Castiel and fellow hunter and father-figure Bobby, hunt down the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who got resurrected together with Lucifer, and kill them in order to take their rings, open Lucifer’s cage, and lock him back in. In an unexpected turn of events, Sam decides to agree to be Lucifer’s vessel, thinking he can expel him. Lucifer growing stronger in Sam’s body because of the demon blood Sam has been drinking, kills Castiel and Bobby, and is ready to kill Dean. Because of their strong brotherly bond, Sam manages to regain control of his body and saves Dean, who has managed to open Lucifer’s cage. Sam jumps in the cage, taking with him Adam, who is still possessed by Michael. Castiel is then resurrected by God, and more powerful than ever he brings Bobby back to life and heals Dean, before returning to Heaven to restore order. Dean having lost his brother goes off to live with his former girlfriend, Lisa, but the final shot of the season finale shows Sam watching his brother from afar.

The fifth’s season finale named “Swan Song,” was also Kripke’s swan song, being his last season as a showrunner. Having announced that he had a specific arc for the show from the beginning, he never deviated from it, even though he knew the TV network decided to pick up the show for more seasons (Kripke qtd. in Bekakos n.p.). The creative process passed on to Sera Gamble, with Kripke remaining on the show
as an executive producer. Seasons six and seven were named by the fans as “The Gamble Years.” Following Gamble’s exit, the show has been passed on to the writers Jeremy Carver, and Andrew Dabb, as well as producer Bob Singer.

Opening with Sam watching his brother struggling to lead a normal life away from hunting, almost a year after last season’s events, we find out that Sam has been back from Hell this entire time, rescued by the demon Crowley. When the brothers reunite, they must fight Crowley and Castiel who are trying to find the location of the Purgatory in order to harvest the souls inhabiting there, while also trying to protect Sam’s mental health that has been compromised by Lucifer.

In the seventh season, the brothers fight the Leviathans, mythical creatures created before the Flood, who escaped the Purgatory and are trying to take over the planet Earth. They must also face a new demon called Abaddon, who is a Knight of Hell and wants to overthrow Crowley so that she can rule Hell herself. The brothers also try to close the Gates of Hell, but through a series of trials they end up banishing all Angels from Heaven who are now trapped on Earth stripped of their Grace.

In the ninth season, Dean kills Abaddon with Cain’s Fist Blade and Sam is briefly possessed by an angel. Trying to remove the Mark of Cain that came with the Blade, Dean dies, but he is resurrected by Crowley as a Knight of Hell. In the tenth season, Sam and Castiel try to turn Dean back into a human. When they succeed, Amara/The Darkness is released, which has been locked and kept away by the Mark of Cain. In the eleventh season, the brothers’ primary concern is to exterminate The Darkness, which turns out to be God’s sister. In their efforts to do so, they ask Lucifer’s help who is still in the cage, while they release him after he has promised to
help. In the end, God and Amara reconcile and Amara forgives Dean by resurrecting Mary, his mother.

In the twelfth season, Lucifer possesses the body of the US President and impregnates his secretary with a Nephilim (a child born from a human and fathered by an angel). She gives birth to a boy named Jack, whose birth causes a rift that pulls Lucifer and the boys’ mother into another dimension, while Castiel dies trying to protect the baby. In the final moments of the finale, Jack has grown into a teenager in mere minutes.

The concluding season so far, finds the brothers emotionally drained by the loss of Castiel and the responsibility of having to raise Jack. In the alternate dimension, Lucifer meets the archangel Michael, who has won the war on the Apocalypse and wants to enter this universe as well. Jack resurrects Castiel while Lucifer returns to the canon universe, only to be followed by Michael. In the final confrontation, Lucifer takes Jack’s powers for himself and Dean agrees to become Michael’s vessel only for a while, so Lucifer can be beaten. Michael succeeds in killing Lucifer but refuses to return Dean’s body while he takes control over him, leaving Sam and Jack behind him.

1.2 Two Brothers Fighting for Humanity and for Each Other

Series creator Eric Kripke has always had a soft spot for American urban legends and horror. Supernatural, a mixture of those, together with fantasy elements and drama centering on family relationships, has captured the minds and hearts of the audience. When its twelfth season premiered, Supernatural became the longest running sci-fi and fantasy TV series on American television, right after The X-Files, which ran for only eleven seasons. With the richness of the American folklore on his
back, Kripke has developed a show full of Americana nostalgia, from the classic car, the road trips all over the country, the classic rock music, the flannel shirts the boys wear, to the overall feeling of impending horror that lurks in every corner that resides in the heart of early American culture. Mythic stories about ghouls, changelings, ghost, the Hook Man or Bloody Mary, exist in American folklore and are as unique as “American baseball. [...] People have heard these stories, but they’re all part of this great mythology of America that speaks to the unique fears we have in America. They’re every bit as relevant today as when they were originally told because if there’s any one cultural zeitgeist at the moment it is that we’re living in the age of anxiety,” Kripke claims (Fernandez n.p.).

Each episode features the monster of the week, which the brothers must track down and kill. Over time, the arc of the show has become far more complex, introducing the idea of demons, angels, Heaven and Hell, but in the beginning it was all about the Wendigos, Shapeshifters, Lamias, even unicorns, and Big Foot. “A lot of these stories are cautionary tales, and they reflect what our culture was afraid of at a particular time [...] For instance, the Hook Man stories, which were predominant in the ‘60s, about the lovers in lovers’ lane who were killed by a lunatic with a hook for hand, were about a culture’s fear of sex and promiscuity” (Kripke qtd. in Fernandez n.p.). The reason why Supernatural works is because it follows the formula of successful horror movies, where the horror threatens the normality and safety of the household, like Poltergeist (1982) and An American Werewolf in London (1981). It tells campfire stories that touch the heart of anyone who is afraid of invisible forces that lurk in the background but cannot quite be explained rationally. Ultimately, it is the fear and anxiety in all of us, that at any moment everything could go wrong, along with the fatalistic feeling that there is nothing we can do about it.
At the heart of the show are the two brothers, Sam and Dean. Their names are
inspired by the classic novel *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, although Kripke
has changed Sal to Sam, because he did not like his lead character named as such ("Fact Scarier than Fiction" n.p.). The concept of family ties is very important in *Supernatural*. The brothers having lost their mother at a young age have grown up looking after each other and, consequently, their father is obsessed finding his wife’s murderer. The emotional trauma and scarring of the characters is represented within the context of their family life and their unnatural upbringing as child-soldiers. Sam is reminiscent of the time when he confesses he is afraid of the dark, and his father gives him a .45 m gun, instead of reassuring his child that he should not be afraid of it ("Pilot"). Every little and big thing they are running away from, always comes back to them through their cases; the strange and unfamiliar they hunt reflect themselves and their relationship. As Henry Jenkins states in his review of the show, “the monsters are, in effect, emotional scars and psychic wounds” (*Supernatural: Fist Impressions* n.p.). The boys are constantly confronted with issues of loyalty, responsibility, free will versus surrendering to a higher power, and sacrificing for the greater good or for the sake of their family.

Nonetheless, the chemistry between the two brothers is what has captured the hearts of fans around the world. All of them claim that *Supernatural* would not have been the same if it had not been for Sam and Dean. The brothers’ bond is intense, complicated and so strong that it has caused them nothing but trouble since the beginning of the series. They are each other’s “weak spot,” as they both confess to each other time and time again during the show.

Dean is the older brother, the macho man, the type who shoots first and asks questions later. He is the leader out of the two brothers, he is impulsive, and can be
quite bullheaded. He is also very compassionate, selfless, fiercely protective, and loyal. His primary role in the family is that of the caretaker. After their mother died, their father decides to avenge her death, and raises them both as soldiers, while he runs off hunting different monsters every night. As a result, Dean takes on the upbringing of his little brother, becoming both mother and father for him. He idolizes Sam as something that should always be protected, and above any cost. Between his emotionally unavailable father and an absent mother, he is the glue that has kept the family together. Putting family first, he has sacrificed any dreams and aspirations, so that he can stand by his father’s side and save people, seeking nothing in return.

His type is that of the bad boy, the guy all women want, and all men want to be. He is cheerful, an avid joker, a man of concrete morals and simple pleasures; he cares about his music, his car, and his brother. At first glance, he seems to be a benevolent Han Solo, or a John Wayne type of guy; a cowboy on the last frontier. However, behind his stern bravado, lies a flawed and traumatized little boy. Raised by his marine father to become a supernatural hunter, he has always been trying to impress him and get emotionally closer to him. When Sam leaves to go to college, he experiences the same trauma of abandonment. His flaw is that he believes himself to be not as important as his brother and father are.

Sam, on the other hand, is the opposite of Dean. If Dean is the brawns, Sam is the brains of the family. However, Sam is also the rebel of the family. He is the one who questions, challenges, and fights with his father, disagreeing with his every decision. He rebels in the most unnatural way by being a good student, participating in the drama club, and by complying with society’s rules. Leaving at 18 to go to Law

4 According to Supernatural’s wiki page, Star Wars was a major influence for Kripke who compared Dean’s character as the Han Solo to Sam’s Luke Skywalker (Dean Winchester - Super-Wiki).
School after winning a full-scholarship, he is told that if he leaves, he should not come back again.

As a child, he grows up around the idea of him being special, of someone that should always be protected. Determined to make his own choices, he becomes rather independent and egocentric. Associated with the concept of the ‘reluctant hero,’ Sam has been shown to be disobedient, moody, self-absorbed, and vengeful. After his girlfriend, Jessica, dies the same horrible death as his mother, Sam unenthusiastically takes on once again the role of the hunter like his father had done, so that he can find the demon who killed his girlfriend and avenge her passing. Despite his upbringing and his constant quest to find normalcy outside his family, Sam has always been close to Dean.

Constantly sacrificing themselves for each other, their relationship can be incredibly unhealthy at times. When things are going well, they are pranking and laughing with each other. But when the weight of the world falls upon their shoulders, they are trying to express their feelings in the only way they know possible through half-spoken sentences and long silences. Both being completely altruistic and selfless when it comes to each other, they have sacrificed themselves without a second thought multiple times and have literally gone to Hell and back for each other. This brotherly bond and the touching family ties exhibited in every episode, constitute the main reason that has kept the fans loyal to the show.

As Kripke mentions time and time again,

---

5 These scenes are usually shot inside the Impala during night-time, with low lighting, and both characters looking straight ahead while trying to share their feelings. The scenes are referred to as BM (Boy Melodrama) and are particularly loved by fans.
“Supernatural has] always been a show about family, much more than it is about anything else. The mythology is only an engine to raise issues about family. A big brother watching out for a little brother, wondering if you have to kill the person you love most, family loyalty versus the greater good, family obligation versus personal happiness.... These are all issues that Dean faces, and in my opinion, they are just as rich, if not richer, than psychic children and demonic plans. Fans seem to worry unnecessarily at times, and I'll say this: It's never going to be a show about just Sam, or just Dean for that matter. It's always going to be a show about brothers” (“Eric Kripke Fields Your Questions About Supernatural” n.p.).

1.3 “The Little Show That Could”: Supernatural as Cult TV

Over time, Supernatural has become one of those shows that seems to gain a bigger following with each season, but it has not always been like that. In the beginning, the show faced negative criticism that has threatened its future on the network. Tom Shales writes “there isn’t much in “Supernatural” to engage viewers older than Sam and Dean,” although the show “does deliver genuine shocks and jolts, enough so that one might reasonably call it electrifying. Or maybe electrocuting- an inarguably less enjoyable sensation” (n.p.). Fans of the show have fought hard to keep it on air with online campaigns and voting, which eventually has managed to earn the renewal of the show. Over time, Supernatural has gone on, winning several online polls about TV’s best show, TV Guide’s first Fan Favorite cover, and multiple People’s Choice Awards. Nicknamed by the fans as “The Little Show That Could,” in its fourteenth season the show still is (Zubernis and Larsen 4).
While fan groups of the show have existed since the beginning, the fans have officially been named “The Supernatural Family” when actor Jared Padalecki described them as his third family: “I have my family, my on-set family, and then our ‘Supernatural’ family […] My ‘Supernatural’ family’s the biggest and strongest, so I love ‘em” (Padalecki qtd. in Zubernis and Larsen *Fan Phenomena* 78). The character Bobby Singer says to the brothers that “family don’t end with blood”, a line that has been used by the fans as their official motto (“No Rest for the Wicked”). The ‘Supernatural family’ has grown bigger and stronger with the show’s success, helping its members cope with emotional, identity or family issues. Over the years, this has been embraced by the actors as well, when Misha Collins established, among others, the non-profit organization “Random Acts,” 6 which has helped rebuild the homes of people hit by the Earthquake in Haiti in 2010, either by donating money or by helping with construction. Fans have also raised money and awareness for Padalecki’s ‘Always Keep Fighting’ campaign, concerning mental health issues. This fiercely loyal audience has given *Supernatural* its cult status.

Cult television is a complicated notion to be accurately defined because it can either refer to the text or to the audience of the show. Sara Gwenllian-Jones has argued that the term cult can be loosely applied to a television program when it is considered unconventional, dark and eccentric, and has drawn “a niche audience” that forms a distinct subculture around it (Gwenllian-Jones qtd. in Pearson 7). Matt Hills debates that a cult fan can be considered under these elements: the “tautological” (the “use of discourse within fandom”), the “temporal” (“the endurance of fans”) and the

6 [https://www.randomacts.org/](https://www.randomacts.org/), inspires people to perform small everyday acts of kindness, such as buying a cup of coffee for a homeless person, or bigger ones, like building a school in Nicaragua.
7 The campaign was launched with the motto printed on a T-shirt. Profits from the sale went on to charities like ‘To Write Love on her Arms’ and others ([http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/Always_Keep_Fighting](http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/Always_Keep_Fighting))
“affective” (“a fan felt experience”) (xi). However, a more integrated definition I believe has been debated by Roberta Pearson where she argues that a cult program is defined by its audience practices. She regards that a text, which has its audience’s complete devotion, along with “an intense physical and emotional involvement,” can be defined as cult because the key characteristic here is found in “the mode of reception, rather than the mode of production” (Pearson qtd. in Pearson 8).

Supernatural fans have been nothing if not verbal about their devotion and almost ritualistic involvement with the show. Beginning from the online petitions and polls to keep the show on air, fan engagements have led the show to stay on air, despite its minimum critical attention. The intense relationship between the brothers is often the most cited reason why fans keep watching the show, as well as its two attractive male protagonists, which have attracted a predominantly female audience.

The engagement with the text is, however, a major reason for the fans’ involvement, as the episodes provide rich material that can be worked and analyzed, usually through “shipping” characters that can help interpret meanings in a different manner mostly through subtext. Supernatural is the second most popular TV show on FanFiction.net, fan fiction’s biggest website, with nearly 123,000 works under its tag. It is also the most blogged about show on Tumblr.com, a micro-blogging online community, which mostly works with moving images, called GIFs, videos and quotes. Together with BBC’s Sherlock and Doctor Who, they have formed the “Holy Trinity” of shows that have shaped the current popular culture and have created the three major fandoms found online. Some fans have even gone a step further combining the three shows into a mashup called “Superwholock,” and writing about

---

*Shipping* derives from the word relationship, and in fandom discourse it is used when fans want two individuals to have a romantic relationship.
the adventures of a detective, his doctor friend, an alien with a blue box, and two brothers in a car who solve cases across space and time.

Its popularity is also credited to the fact that it is a highly quotable show. Since Tumblr is a visual medium, people like to reblog GIFs and images with their favorite quotes, their favorite characters sharing intimate or hilarious moments, or recapitulating lines and key moments of the plot to prove an argument. Over the years *Supernatural* has covered such a broad thematology, which makes people half-joke that ‘Supernatural has a GIF for everything,’ meaning it is so quotable that it can be used in conversations about relationships, babysitting, other pop culture media and products, as well as about the show itself.

By inserting their fandom to any cultural reference, the fans greatly invest in the content of the show that usually comes from repeated viewing of the series episodes. This active viewership highlights a strong and loyal audience, which through the appropriation of the text, establishes its cult position within the mainstream. However, this repeated viewing can hide negative connotations that characterize the fan as “deviant, abnormal, [...] obsessive, dysfunctional or pathological” (Robson 209). It is precisely through this commitment and knowledge deriving from it that accentuates the pleasure the fan receives in engaging with a sophisticated and stimulating text. The study and appropriation of the text indicate the fan not as a mere consumer but as a patron of it: “For the television fans, this means that their favorite series, its cast, crew, and even the network broadcasting it are key components of the fan text and are items available for the audience to consume or digest, a concept that [is] relate[d] to as ‘patronage’” (Robson 211). Thus, *Supernatural* fans with their extensive knowledge showcased in their dominant online presence, not only have managed to keep their favorite show on the
air for fourteen years, but also they have grown into a cult fandom that the show itself does not fail to address.

What is the meaning of fandom, though, and how is it different from an average cultural consumer? This is the question that the next section will attempt to explore.

CHAPTER TWO

A Brief Overview of Fandom

Mass hysteria, frenzy, delirium; only a handful of words are used here to describe how fans react to the sight of their beloved object of affection. Images of roaring teenage girls are what comes to mind when the word “fan” is mentioned. For the most part, fandom as a sociocultural phenomenon has not been a modern concept, even though its appellation and study by academics is. The word fan, an abbreviation for fanatic, is believed to come from the Latin word *fanum*, which means sanctuary or temple (*Fan | Definition of Fan by Merriam-Webster*). Having first appeared in the seventeenth century, it disappeared only to resurface around the nineteenth century, to refer to the ardent observers of sports. Today it has come to refer to people who are dedicated admirers of popular culture as well, for instance music, film, and television.

Contemporary audiences of the nineteenth century, for example, were amazed and even aroused by the composer Franz Liszt, which led to a craze described as *Lisztomania*. According to Heinrich Heine, who first coined the term, the audience used to go on hysterics over the composer (Salmi 140). His magnetism, electricity, and his manner of playing the piano without even looking at the sheet, were enough to send his fans into a frenzy. The way he performed on stage and his level of fame was like a contagion, a virus all over the audience: “He performed at a frantic pace, and
soon Lisztomania was like a virus among the public. Fervent admirers tried to cut curls from his hair, and even collected his cigar butts from the street” (Salmi 139).

This uncontrolled behavior that could cause this strange paroxysm over the sight of a beloved person, is evident in Hollywood productions, when actors reach a celebrity status. Commonly associated with youth culture, female followers are the most prominent devotees who cause riots outside concert halls and movie premieres. Strong examples of early fandom behavior are those known as Elvis-mania, and Beatlemania. Women in the 1950s and 1960s were often in hysterics, shouting and declaring their love for the singers. Moreover, as Mark Duffett mentions, between the 1920s and 1950s Hollywood aimed to please mostly its female audience, by casting young actors that would fill the category of a heartthrob, such as Rudolph Valentino (7). When he died, a massive horde of people had gathered outside his funeral home, causing a massive uproar that led to police action. This episode could constitute an early phenomenon of celebrity culture. It is quite indisputable then, that “there [can] be no fame if there [are] no fans, and there [can] be no fans if there [are] no media” (Ferris and Harris qtd. in Duffett 6).

Concerning issues of terminology then, a fan is someone who is emotionally involved with a text and visits it regularly. A complete definition of fandom is given by Cornel Sandvoss, who states, “I define fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors” (8, italics in original).
However, popular culture was first perceived as the driving force of consumption in capitalist societies. What follows is an overview of some theoretical aspects of popular culture that will help me demonstrate the evolving relationship between fans and the fannish object.

**The Politics of Postmodern Theory in Audiences**

### 2.1 The Frankfurt School

Marxists theorists, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, wrote their famous manifesto called *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1944), where they criticized modern capitalist societies and their production of mass commodities. They argue that popular culture, run by mass media corporations, produces identical commodities ready for consumption by the public. This mass-produced culture deprives the public of any creative and original thinking and feeds them with ready-made products available and suitable for everybody. The artificiality of popular culture erases any individuality and forms a passive audience. Working class people have no other choice but to accept unquestionably what mass media offers them (Horkheimer and Adorno 3). These mass-produced commodities offer no intellectual stimulation and manage to homogenize the audience and shift it into inertia.

In their view, the entertainment industry is industrially producing indistinguishable materials that are fed to the public, depriving them of their ability to think critically, dismiss or accept the culture industry, which results in them passively receiving and consuming them. In particular, they argue:

By subordinating in the same way and to the same end all areas of intellectual creation, by occupying men’s senses from the time they leave the factory in
the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day, this subsumption mockingly satisfies the concept of a unified culture which the philosophers of personality contrasted with mass culture. (Horkheimer and Adorno 6)

This elitist viewpoint places popular culture in the low, while elevating other forms of art, such as ballet and opera, referred to as ‘high culture’. Viewers represent a marketplace, where the value of a product that finds its use in the consumption of the individual (use value) is not separated from its exchange value, meaning the cost of producing and marketing that product. Without separating the use-value from the products’ exchange-value, this Marxist outlook equates culture with the economic industry, wishing all cultural endeavors to have economic success. This is ultimately impossible since presumably, as stated previously, the passivity of the audience forbids any kind of rebellion. This predisposed and biased notion is in error because, as argued, audiences are not mere consumers and do not accept cultural commodities passively, but rather they engage creatively with the material at hand.

Audiences are no longer apathetic individuals, but active participants in media production. They are not just mindless consumers, as the Marxist school would have them be, but loyal customers that are created over time. People now can choose what to watch among a myriad of films and television shows. Television culture is now experiencing a golden age with shows such as Breaking Bad (2008), Game of Thrones (2011) and House of Cards (2013) being produced and watched by millions of viewers long after their original air dates. With the rise of technology, the ability to record television programs or watch them through online streaming platforms has given audiences the ability to watch anything at their leisure. Through this practice,
consumption of a media text can lead to a detailed and meaningful examination of the text and, consequently to passionate viewer involvement. Fanbases are thus now created far more easily, rapidly, and form greater ties between text and viewer than before.

Still, where does the consumer end and the fan begin? According to Hills, “fans are […] already consumers” (27). While they do embody that image, they are however the quintessential consumer. Once the viewer is dismantled from the identity of the mere consumer, they are embracing the identity of the fan. While fandom culture has a lot to do with the inspection and analysis of the text, it also involves commodity consumption. By purchasing merchandise and collectable items, fans do participate in consumption, however, their original liking of the text comes for free. “Fans are more than consumers because they have especially strong emotional attachments to their objects and they use them to create relationships with both their heroes and with each other” (Ferris & Harris qtd. in Duffett 21). In order to become users of commodities, viewers need to have emotional attraction and form a bond with the text. Fans may be the ideal consumers for mass marketing and popular culture, but they are more than that. Along with the role of the collector, they are also interpreters, producers, curators, and many more. They create online fanbases where they share their love and interest for a specific cultural product, they preserve it, defend it in online and offline debates, and try to fill in the gaps in the story’s canon wherever they identify them. All these they do for free, without ever expecting any compensation. Fans create, curate, and preserve knowledge that derives from affection for materials and characters attached to the product out of pure unadulterated enjoyment and devotion.
As stated above, with the advancement of technology and the rapid changes in viewing habits, audiences are now able to return to a text repeatedly, criticize its ideology, and produce different readings of it. Currently, television sets are in every household. Starting back from the early 1980s with VHS, moving to DVDs in the 2000s, and currently enjoying online streaming services that allow viewers to binge watch their favorite television show whenever they wish, programs are available for viewing any time.

Provided we live in the era of several meanings and interpretations, all texts produced differ from one another. Currently, a text is bound by social and theoretical dynamics that play a crucial role in the understanding and appropriation of it within the dominant culture. Cultural Studies and, consequently, Television Studies, attempt to interpret the dynamics between fans and text. Apart from being ideal consumers, fans “also express anti-commercial beliefs,” meaning the space created in the fanbase is also a place where concerns about the dominant ideology are expressed (Hills 29).

2.2 Postmodernism and the death of the author

But what is exactly postmodernist ideology and how does it fit into cultural commodities? There is no short definition of postmodernism that can incorporate all the diverse contexts and effects the term embodies. Modernism, that preceded it, rose in the Western society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gaining its major recognition after the end of World War I. It rejected all Enlightenment ideas and traditional forms of art, moving away from an objective depiction of the world into the realm of the symbolic, the ironic, the unconscious, and abstract. Some of its major innovations in the arts include the disruption of linear narrative, the stream-of-
consciousness technique, and the struggle to decode the world around in an effort to arrive at the ultimate truth.

Redefining these notions in a deconstructive manner, postmodernism questions everything that has been taken for granted. It perceives reality as more fragmented, diverse and culture-specific. For the postmodernists, there is no absolute truth that defines human existence, there is no History, no Author, and there is attention paid to the workings of culture. As Jim Collins argues, “postmodernism signals a move away from the self-enclosed world of the avant-garde back into the realm of day-to-day life” (247). He adds that one of the most accepted ways to lessen the gap between high art and mass culture is through the appropriation of signs, icons, and symbols though mass media and their “rearticulation,” meaning to give them different meaning and significance (248). Television can only be defined by a series of stylistic developments that have occurred over time, such as the proliferation of signs, intertextuality, hyperconsciousness, the use of metanarratives and, most recently, the “breaking” of the fourth wall.9

The proliferation and incorporation of existing signs in postmodern television were mostly developed through the technological advancements of how television is viewed in households. The possession of VCRs, DVD recordings, and now online streaming platforms, has benefited the circulation of mass media signs and their incorporation in popular culture. For viewers to be able to recognize and identify a sign, it is sometimes important that they possess knowledge of the initial appearance of it. However, some signs seem to be inherent in our culture and we are so familiar with them, that even our half-knowledge of them does not stop us from extracting

---

9 In breaking the “fourth wall” the actor acknowledges the audience mid performance, and in television they look directly at the camera and address the viewers.
various interpretations of them. This is what intertextuality is all about. As John Fiske argues in his book *Television Culture* (1987), “intertextuality exists rather in the space between texts,” and the relationship between texts is based on knowledge that we sometimes have over those texts, how we associate them and compose a new meaning (108).

Television texts are essentially intertextual, since viewers compose meaning out of their experiences and other cultural media, giving television a multitude of connotations, which Fiske names *polysemy* (15). These different interpretations given to the text signal the existence of a diverse and highly critical audience. The text is thus transformed, and each individual transformation carries a separate meaning. The text no longer belongs to its original author, but to the audience. Meanings, memories, and cultural signs all blend to create a new text that is similar, yet different, to the previous one. The original author is disconnected, no longer part of the narrative, and their text exists simultaneously between the before and the now, ‘before’ being the author’s conception of what his text is, and ‘now’ being the audience’s perception and interpretation.

Roland Barthes discussed this notion in his essay “The Death of the Author,” (Image, Music, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath, 1977) where he writes that “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (146). When we encounter a text, we do not need to ask ourselves what the author means, because the signs are deciphered according to our own cultural background, rendering the
author's intentions irrelevant. The text becomes a living organism from which we 
generate our own meaning.

Barthes of course did not mean that the reader's interpretation is arbitrary, and 
they should completely disregard the author’s words. Reading should involve some 
rewriting of the text’s meaning. “The reader is the space in which all the quotations 
that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies 
not in its origin but in its destination” (148). This re-articulation of the text signifies a 
highly critical and sophisticated audience, that can manipulate and receive a text by 
connecting an array of other cultural commodities, according to their own needs.

2.3 Pastiche, Hyperconsciousness and the Narrative

Usually a text comprises of various scraps of older features and/or styles that 
artists have imitated, either out of respect for the original, or as a poor imitation. This 
postmodern notion that something is ‘already said,’ has been described by Marxist 
critic Frederic Jameson as pastiche.

In his book Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991) 
he claims that “[t]he disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal 
consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-
nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (16). The capitalism 
postmodern society is experiencing is made from cultural expressions that are devoid 
of any originality, thus inducing Jameson to entitle postmodern culture as depthless. 
The nostalgia originating from the duplication of the past implies for Jameson a 
culture of surface, fragmented and devoid of meaning, which creates a new style 
where there is no original, with meaning being conveyed solely through intertextuality 
(Jameson 20).
However, for critic Linda Hutcheon, in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History* (1987), the use of parody is liberating, as it challenges the creativity behind the history of the original. Hutcheon believes that parody is what provides formal expression to a principle within the community. “There is absolutely nothing random or ‘without principle’ in the parodic recall and re-examination of the past. […] To include irony and play is never necessarily to exclude seriousness of purpose in postmodern art” (Hutcheon qtd. in Duvall 11, italics in original). There is value in the style of the postmodern “text” as it raises historical and political awareness of contemporary society.

As a Marxist, Jameson believes that with “the death of the subject” and the downfall of originality, all original ideas have been thought of, and all unique practices have been attempted. Nevertheless, his criticism excludes women and minorities, so all oppositional voices are inserted into the dominant ideology of the patriarchal traditional family form. This is where Jameson’s and Hutcheon’s opinions differentiate and, as the latter argues, “Postmodernism attempts to be historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive” (Hutcheon 193). This re-articulation of the “already said” is indeed a recognition of the power certain texts still hold over our culture and convey a different significant meaning from the original text. This form of intertextuality between the past and the present, which serves more as an homage than pastiche, is more visible in television than any other medium, because “the already said is ‘still being said’” (Collins 251).

This clashing of past and present together, which results in the formation of a new hybrid text by the audience, is called *bricolage* (Barker 209). Highly visible in postmodern texts, it accentuates the intertextuality existing among several texts and commodities. When audiences become bricoleurs, they essentially reconstruct and
connect previously unrelated signs and emit new meanings and new signs out of them, independent of their original purpose. For example, Quentin Tarantino’s films are a medley of various genres that pay homage to their original sources. *Django Unchained* (2012), another case in point, is a mixture of spaghetti western, adventure film, black comedy, epic, and drama. All these elements are brought together to create something hybrid, yet completely contemporary, that forms its own original meaning and is able to stand independently and in context with its sources at the same time.

Audiences’ ability to recognize and make distinctions among the many symbols visible in a text is a sign of the audiences’ *hyperconsciousness*. The proliferation of cable networks and the constant reruns of classic Hollywood movies and shows equip the viewers with the televisual literacy to recognize actors’ names, their previous works, various texts from popular culture that have made their way in the world of television, as well as be exceedingly familiar with television’s programs. These intertextual references and awareness of them showcase a highly attentive and critical audience with an extensive knowledge of popular culture. However, for an audience to be hyperconscious of its own knowledge, the text itself also needs to be aware of its own status, history, performativity, reception, and distribution.

Postmodern texts are aware mostly of their narrative, characters, and cultural status. “In the ‘meta-pop’ texts that we now find on television […] we encounter […] a hyperconscious rearticulation of media culture by media culture” (Collins 252). In the postmodern text, we can locate parody, hyperawareness, bricolage, and homage, not only between two different texts, but also in the same text as well, when the latter becomes self-referential and influences its own narrative. This is a technique used greatly in *Supernatural*, which I will discuss in a following section.
Moreover, when television acknowledges its own audience directly, we have the dissolution of the fourth wall and the insertion of the *metanarrative*. The metanarrative technique, like any postmodern trait, is conscious of its own grand story, skeptical and dubious about the culture in which it operates, and it is structured on pastiche, reference, and criticism of the modern world. The classic narrative in television is created in such a way so as to invite “producerly” relations between the audience and the text (Feuer qtd. in Fiske 144). When the narrative is open-ended and different meanings can be constructed from a variety of audience members, the text loses its singular meaning and is thus open to criticism.

The ability of the audience to recognize the artificiality of the narrative and insert their knowledge of popular culture into that narrative is described by Scott Olson in his essay *Meta-television: Popular Postmodernism* (1987), as *meta-television* (284). Meta-television programs rely heavily on the audience’s perception of popular culture and their ability to recognize television’s own self-reflexivity and intertextuality, sometimes occurring in the show’s own narrative. A key characteristic of meta-television programs, is when a character addresses the viewer directly and thus shatters the illusion of artificiality. This is stated as the “breaking of the fourth wall.” Meta-television often parodies greatly, through mimesis and pastiche, the structure, archetype, and setting of other programs as an attempt to deconstruct and reflect on other programs (Olson 288). This process is titled *metagenericism* and, in order to be successful, it relies on the audience’s pervasive knowledge of cultural literacy, since it is necessary for the realization of parody. Viewers will only produce meaning and find pleasure in metagenericism if the articulation of parody is understood according to its relationship with the original text.
The purpose of the postmodern metanarrative is to reveal, persuade, analyze, interrogate, challenge, and comment on the legitimacy of the elements existing inside the media scape with a critical manner. This allows the audience to consider and question the dominant discourse and ideologies that have shaped the production of the text.

2.4 Ideology and the Modes of Production

How a text is received by its audience is not only a matter of proper articulation, but also a matter of the economics that determine the production and distribution of a text. Adorno and Horkheimer’s capitalist view state that cultural products are commodities created by the entertainment industry with an attempt to homogenize the audience and “debas[e] their taste into that of the lowest common denomination” (Fiske 38). Their separation of culture as high and low essentially argues for an inferiority of popular culture that converts the audience into a passive mass. There is no real contact with the cultural product, since it serves no purpose in educating the masses and is created through capitalist labor. The producer and the consumer are themselves commodities of exchange within the capitalist ideology.

However, these Marxist beliefs point to a view of ideology that is monolithic, pessimistic, and it denies the effectiveness of popular culture politics. Let us not forget that what the Marxists entitle as high culture, is contemporary period’s popular culture with practices akin to our own. *Lisztomania* was a trait of nineteenth century’s fandom culture. Television culture is indeed consumer-oriented, yet interpretations are generated and altered by the people who are active producers of meaning. Popular culture is established when consumers become bricoleurs of commodities and meaningful signs exert new content out of them. A program can mean different things
to different people, and only by active viewing do these meanings manifest. Consumers are no longer passive opposite a text, but discriminate and choose what to take in. As Chris Barker asserts,

Contemporary popular culture is, primarily, a commercially produced one and there is no reason to think that this is likely to change in the foreseeable future. However, it is argued that popular audiences make their own meanings with the texts of popular culture. They bring to bear their own cultural competencies and discursive recourses to the consumption of commodities. Popular culture can be regarded as the meaning and practices produced by popular audiences at the moment of consumption. Thus the study of popular culture becomes centered on the uses to which commodities are put. (68-69)

Viewers usually interpret the messages they receive from television programs according to their experiences, their lives, needs, and sometimes their subliminal desires. The director’s take is merely another stimulus for the audience, not necessarily the way the creator conceives the world. In addition, audiences interpret a text according to the dominant social ideology. Ideology can be defined as the way the cultural belief system is considered by individuals as naturally structured, when in fact it is shaped by the dominant class and the surrounding media (White 124). It instructs the way people are supposed to think and act, and find natural to do so, even though the value system is constructed in such a way by others for us to believe so.

The dominant ideology in Supernatural is not politics but religion. The narrative myth of the show is constructed around the Judeo-Christian belief system. This is an implicit decision made by the writers since Christianity is identified as the
major religion practiced in the world. It would have been absurd if the writers had, for example chosen Paganism to be the dominant religion, since it is a practice not exercised now and it does not constitute the ideological structure of the western culture in which the show is produced. However, the show has expanded its own rebellious take on Christianity, constructing a different narrative of monsters, demons, and angels that has been created over the first five seasons of the show. This new gospel has been accepted by the fans and in turn the show has accepted its fans inside its own narrative by constructing a (neo)religious discourse between the two. According to Charlotte Howell, this occurs as a result of the fans’ development and participation in the show in nearly religious acts when they are represented in the show (18). This representation, however, does not connote any negative meanings or images towards the fans, both within the show and in reality.

The show has managed to be produced in such a way that its consumers are also its inspiration and a major device that helps with the continuation of the narrative. According to the relationships of production, as presented by James Monaco in his book *How to Read a Film* (2000), the relationship between the work and the observer signify consumer affiliations. In the following diagram, the relationships between producer, product, and receiver are depicted in the “triangle of the artistic experience” (30-31):
These relations do not differ from the ones we encounter on television. A text is created by the Artist in order to be consumed by the Observer. According to Marxist theories of consumption, the work of the Artist is a product created through labor in order to be exchanged for its use-value by the Observer. The Observer passively consumes the Work that is being produced inside the dominant social Ideology, thus limiting themselves in the position of a mere economic consumer. This implies that all cultural products serve the dominant ideology and brand viewers as ideal, yet mindless consumers: “they buy the latest works […], they avidly collect past works, they go to great lengths to purchase tickets […], and they are most likely to purchase […] company merchandising, join official fans clubs, and participate and “special” promotions” (Cavicchi 62).

What these regressive Marxist views connive at is that modern audiences are in fact part of the economic consumption as participators and examine thoroughly a cultural text before consuming it. It may be that the abundance of television programs and their effortless accessibility have turned consumers into “couch potatoes,” yet they are not passive spectators, neither they are forced to watch television, but they do
so freely. This choice takes place along with the awareness that one also becomes a consumer of popular culture. “Sometimes wider society uses the term ‘fan’ to indicate an impassionate economic consumer” (Duffett 20), however fans are not concerned entirely with consumption.

The line between Artist and Observer in the above triangle is a dotted one, because it indicates that the relationship between producer-text-receiver could be an interactive one. With the growth of technologies and the internet, this relationship is now more reciprocal than ever. Audiences can interact not just with the creator of a work, but aside from consuming it, they can interpret it and appropriate it according to their own aspirations. This is managed though the concept of textual poaching.

CHAPTER THREE

Participatory Culture and Textual Poaching

Drawing from de Certeau, Henry Jenkins’s inspiring Textual Poachers (1992) argues that fandom is a participatory culture that rereads the material in a different manner, “poaches” aspects of the original text and essentially transforms the experience of media consumption (23). Fans appropriate the text, and their engagement often derives from frustration and antagonism towards the material, because they want to make it better-or, in other cases, perfect it. They “[take] away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader […]”; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write (de Certeau qtd. in Jenkins 24). This creation of intertextual and polysemic brand-new narratives is what defines fandom for Jenkins. Through the production of new materials, fans create new interpretations, new artworks, and new communities.
This preoccupation though, has stigmatized fans as strange, social misfits, and delusional passive consumers. This marginalization of a group that has different tastes from the one that generally complies with the prevalent ideology has been identified as “othering.” First coined by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), it shows how a group of people define themselves as superior (in the book’s case the Western culture) over another group with which they had minimum or no interaction. This notion can be applied to fandom, as it is fans themselves who first differentiate themselves from society because of mistaken perceptions.

Jenkins has identified the ways in which othering has helped create fan stereotypes, characterizing fans as “brainless consumers […] social misfits [who] place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material, […] emotionally and intellectually immature [people who] are unable to separate fantasy from reality” (10). In spite of these claims, fan culture is a highly complex organism with its own sets of rules and practices. The dominant narrative usually sees and perpetuates the stereotypes of only a handful of fans.

When we watch television, we do so not only because it is fun, or we find the stories compelling, but because a major lure of a story is to make us care about the characters and identify with them. Although identification is not necessary to emotionally engage its audience, it is something that happens inherently. When we place ourselves in someone else’s shoes we exercise empathy, “understand characters and morally evaluate them without ever committing our feelings to them” (Smith 50). Even though media always cultivate images they want to promote, individuals are intelligent enough to reject or accept any image they deem false or unrealistic. Consequently, fans are not passive and brainless consumers with no emotional or
intellectual maturity, since they are capable and intelligent enough to read between the lines of a narrative.

When audiences engage with popular culture, they are also shaping their identity through it. Identifying themselves with characters on a story, they can picture and map where they have been and where they are going. Their perception of the world and themselves in it is enhanced, they become more aware and develop tools to inspect, and criticize the very culture in which they are a part of: “The different environment created by the mass media [does not] unhinge the self, […] but rather anchors the self, allowing people to shape a coherent idea of their individuality” (Cavicchi 157). Moreover, the stereotype of someone who is placing an excessive importance on trivial knowledge is quite outdated.

Living in a culture where the flow of information and the circulation of media content is ceaseless, audiences are compelled to be more active than ever. The relationship between participatory culture and the media (especially the internet) is described by Jenkins as a “convergence” that relies on the active participation of audiences and their interaction “in search of the kinds of entertainment they want” (Convergence Culture 2-3). Fans usually thrive and delight in learning material related to their object of adoration, because it gives them a sense of intimacy both with the text and with other fans. More often than ever, a “true fan” is the one who knows details about the genre of the story, its origins, its modes of production within the medium, or stories from the set. This pleasure in exchanging knowledge, especially through the internet, not only demonstrates the intelligence and participation of fans, but also highlights the intertextuality between the medium and its fanbase. Besides, who has decided which information is trivial and which is not?
Thus, fans produce meanings and interpretations, artwork, new narratives called fanfiction, video art, costumes based on their favourite characters called cosplaying, new communities, and new identities. “In each case, fans are drawing on material from the dominant media and employing them in ways that serve their own interests and facilitate their own pleasures” (Jenkins, *Strangers No More, We Sing* 214). They are the driving force that keeps a story alive and running.

If we equate a cultural text with an iceberg, what most people notice is the small fraction above water that amounts to only a 10% of the whole iceberg. The remaining 90% is below water, and it is precisely that mass which holds the iceberg steady and capable of floating. If the tip of the iceberg is a narrative (a literary one, a movie, or a television show), then the rest that holds the story in place is the world constructed and maintained by its fans. To describe this, Matt Hills has coined the term *hyperdiegesis*, which is “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension” (137). This provides a coherent world created and operated by the fans, in which they can explore the world of the show themselves.

What *Supernatural* does very successfully is incorporate within its narrative arc this intertextuality between its story and fans. In its essence, *Supernatural* is a polymediated narrative; we are able to come across Jenkins’ convergence concept between the fandom and the narrative, but also between the fandom and the media platforms the fans use to talk about the show. Audiences being both producers and

---

10 Cosplay, a contraction of the words costume and play, is practiced by fans who dress up with self-made costumes and accessories to represent a specific character.

11 The “iceberg theory,” was first coined by Ernest Hemingway as a style of writing, where the deeper meaning of a text is not evident on the surface but is implicit in the underlying details.
consumers have influenced the show’s narrative more than once, with producers incorporating fans of the show inside its canon.

3.1 Power Dynamics Between Fans and Producers

“Don’t talk about the fandom” is a notion heard within the fandom very often. As much as fans find delight in conversation about their beloved show, they want to keep their thoughts private and separate from non-fans and the producers. Boundaries are to be respected. In Supernatural, the boundaries have not only collapsed, they have also merged, essentially breaking the invisible fourth wall between fans and narrative. Supernatural “has become the poster child for meta episodes […] partly because creator Eric Kripke has been savvy enough to monitor his fandom fairly close from the start” (Zubernis and Larsen 157). There is an ever-evolving dynamic between fans and the producers, which is facilitated by the Internet. This relationship between fan/viewer and producer/writer has promoted a closer relationship, in which fans act as bricoleurs of meaning and are recognized as something more than passive viewers that exert a rather big power over the finished product. I will illustrate this communication through the reading of a few significant episodes.

There exists a high level of intertextuality not only between the fans and the producers, but also inside pop culture itself, as it is often cited within the narrative of episodes and it is up to the audience to recognize the signs as well as decipher them. This hyperconsciousness of the audience is also facilitated through the bricolage of the canon’s narrative, a pre-existing knowledge about the material behind the scenes of the show and fandom’s inside jokes discussed through various social media platforms.
When the fandom finds its way inside the narrative, it is because the producers are acknowledging it. In the beginning it was only about the Winchesters finding out they have fans as fictional characters within their own canon and, eventually, this has escalated with the producers inserting fans within the narrative when they could get a good story out of it. At first, it was quite daunting for the fans to be acknowledged directly from their own object of adoration, but overtime this meta-treatment became kind of regular. The representation of the *Supernatural* fandom within the show itself has started from making the fans feel a cringe from watching a version of themselves inside the show, from fighting for a proper representation, to being awarded with an entire episode written for them as a love letter from the producers. It might have taken *Supernatural* some ten odd years to achieve this kind of connection with its fanbase, but the majority of fans can finally agree that their show is listening and it finally perceives them in an appropriate way, befit to the standards of reality.

### 3.2 “There are Sam-girls and Dean-girls”

In the episode “The Monster at the End of This Book” (4.18), we encounter the first example of bricolage as the show relies on the knowledge of the fans to read the signs of fandom written in the episode. The blurring of reality and fiction is introduced through offline fan practices such as live-action role playing and fan fiction. The episode begins with Sam and Dean investigating a case when they are mistaken for LARPers (Live Action Role Players) by the man who owns a comic book store introducing them to the “*Supernatural*” books. In reference to the initial character-names Kripke had in mind taken from Kerouac’s novel, the owner firstly mistakes the names of the characters by calling them Sal and Dean. Furthermore, the author of the books, called Carver Edlund (an alias), is actually an assemblage of the two writers of the show, these of Jeremy Carver and Ben Edlund. It is also speculated
that the name of the publisher the brothers visit to find out Edlund’s real name, Sera Siege, is also based on two other writers, those of Sera Gamble and Julie Siege.

The brothers find out that the books are no longer printed, since there are not enough fans, which parallels to the show facing cancelation in its early seasons since the ratings were not satisfactorily. Sam discloses that “[The books are] pretty obscure. I mean, almost zero circulation. Uh, started in '05. The publisher put out a couple dozen before going bankrupt” (4.18). The fanbase, although small, is very passionate and has led Supernatural to winning the first fan-chosen cover on TV Guide magazine, several People’s Choice Awards over the years as well as the award for best fandom in 2013. After the brothers find the writer, whose real name is Chuck Shirley, they read the books and discover there is an online fan community about them that writes fan fiction, blogs and has teams like “Sam-girls” “Dean-girls,” and slash fans. Addressing the phenomenon of slash fiction called wincest, the brothers are appalled with Dean asking, “They do know we’re brothers, right?”

Further addressing fan activities, the brothers go in online forums and read fan comments. A fan called Simpatico, which was a real name on the forum Television Without Pity, commented “the story line is trite, clichéd, and overall craptastic,” (4.18). This comment by the writers serves as the perfect vehicle to address the fans for the first time.

However, when the brothers first meet Chuck they have to convince him that they are not some crazy fans with excellent encyclopedic knowledge about the books, but the actual Winchesters he has been writing about. Frightened, Chuck exclaims

---

12 Henry Jenkins defines the term slash fiction as “the convention of employing a stroke or “slash” to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists” (Textual Poachers 186).
“Is this a Misery\textsuperscript{13} thing? It is. It’s a Misery thing,” firstly articulating the negative ways in which fans are perceived. However, in the end it is also revealed that Chuck is a prophet. Discovering that the stories in his books came to life, he remarks “I write things and then they come to life. Yeah, no I’m definitely a god. A cruel, cruel, capricious god” (4.18). This foreshadows his revelation about his status as God later on and serves as a metaphor for Kripke, who initially created the show and has acquired a cult god-like status in the fandom. “Thus Kripke gets to both mock himself and validate his own choices as ‘creator’ with generally amused approval from the fans” (Zubernis and Larsen 160).

3.3 Becky, the Super-Fan

In the season five opener “Sympathy for the Devil” (5.01), we are introduced to the character of Becky Rosen. She is approached by Chuck in an online forum when he needs her to deliver a message to Sam and Dean, because she is “[his] number one fan” (5.01). Agitated, she asserts that she wants to be respected:

Becky: Look, Mr. Edlund… Yes, I’m a fan, but I really don’t appreciate being mocked. I know Supernatural’s just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and reality.

Chuck: Becky, it’s all real.

Becky: I knew it! (5.01)

By disclosing to her that Sam and Dean are real, Chuck has broken the fourth wall between the books and fans of the books within the show’s canon. The fan response to Becky’s portrayal is primarily negative. When she meets the brothers, she is

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Misery}, a novel by Stephen King, concerns a famous writer who is rescued but kept captive by a self-proclaimed No1 fan, who tortures him until he modifies his latest story to match her fantasies. The book was also adapted to a movie with the same title.
hyperventilating and will not stop touching them. She embodies the stereotypical “out-of-control” fangirl with her obsession verging on the spectrum of the hysterical (Zubernis and Larsen 165). She objectifies the brothers, strengthening the argument that fangirls are here only “for the hot guys.” Fans identify her as aggressively sexual, barely able to contain herself around the Winchesters, with poor social skills, and a horrible sense of fashion, thus rejecting her image as a proper representation of the fandom.

Over time they grow less frustrated with her, as the show makes an effort to present her and the fans in a more sympathetic light in “The Real Ghostbusters” (5.09). Becky’s encyclopedic knowledge of the books helps the Winchesters with locating a key weapon for the plot, essentially helping the brothers continue their mission. In the beginning of the episode, Sam and Dean are tricked by Becky into believing she needs their help when in reality she brings them to the first ever “Supernatural” fan convention that has to do with Chuck’s novels (5.09). The brothers come face to face with other fans of the book (all male!) dressed alike, or like various monsters from the novels. There are memorabilia sold, people cosplaying, and panels that cover a wide range of thematology, such as “The Secret Life of Dean,” and the “Homoerotic Subtext of Supernatural” (5.09). The brothers are very confused as to why somebody would like their stories so much as to dress up like them and attend conventions, to which a pair of cosplayers answers that it offers them purpose: “You’re wrong, you know. About Supernatural. I’m not sure you get what the story’s about. In real life? He sells stereo equipment. I fix copiers. Our lives suck. But to be Sam and Dean? To wake up every morning and save the world? To have a brother who would die for you. Well, who wouldn’t want that?” (5.09). What makes the books and, consequently, the show so popular with fans is that besides the differences
between the characters and themselves, there is always a level of identification, even in the smallest aspects. The writers realize that this is the core of their story and the driving force of the show.

What they also do is nod at the fan practices of fan fiction writing, especially in slash fiction, by making the faux Sam and Dean couple lovers instead of brothers. In reality, the faux couple is the moderator of the *Supernatural* forums at *Television Without Pity*. So, by basing their characters on real life people, Kripke manages to slash both his fans “and to make a reference to the ways in which real life fans of the real television show slash the actors” (Zubernis and Larsen 169). By taking the subtext of slash fiction and inserting it into the canon he acknowledges the fans work and viewes the fandom in a positive manner, since both faux Sam and Dean and Becky end up saving the day.

Although Becky is portrayed in a more sympathetic light in this episode, rather than the less flattering version of herself emerging in the seventh season in “Season Seven: Time for a Wedding” (7.08). With the help of a witch, Becky uses a love potion on Sam to trick him into marrying her. When she showcases her new husband to her school reunion, she feels special and not the “yucky-Becky” she has always been. In the end, it turns out that her witch friend is in fact a demon. The image of Becky as the neurotic fangirl is once again supported by fans. She is perceived as being anti-social, too immersed in the books in a negative way, and her presence is acknowledged as inconsistent within the show and the fandom in general. This explains why Becky might have been a textual poacher with her fanfiction writing, but represented a caricature of the female fan.
3.4 “The Girl with the Dungeons and the Dragons Tattoo”

*Supernatural* having the reputation of listening to its fans, writes a new character in the show that “preserv[es] the integrity of his story while still incorporating fan interests” (Karkanias 15). Charlie Bradbury is introduced in the seventh season as a computer prodigy that can help the brothers defeat the Leviathan in the episode “The Girl with the Dungeons and the Dragons Tattoo” (7.20). As a replacement of Becky, Charlie is her exact opposite: geeky, clever, and queer. Charlie became a fan favorite instantly, since many of the fans of *Supernatural* are identified to be female and most of them fall under the spectrum of queerness. Cheeky but not provocative, always ready to fight with the brothers to save whoever needed saving, Charlie embodies the secret desires of nearly every fan: to be able to help the Winchesters fight the good fight and be the friend and ally they so much need. “Saving people, hunting things, the family business? I am down”. (“Slumber Party” 9.04). It is any fan’s dream to agree to this wishful thought and answer to it wholeheartedly. For Charlie to reference the quote of the Winchester family echoes as another acceptance of the fandom on behalf of the writers. The positive representation of her identity as a queer, feminine and geeky character, is highly valued by fans and comes in as a pleasant contrast with the majority of negative stereotypes and representations of fannish identity.

However, Charlie’s murder at the end of season ten is horrifying, and fans are outraged by the writer’s decision. Her death has been characterized as unnecessary and uncalled for, as many feel that “their past investment and trust in the show was misplaced, and that they are now not being heard or even purposefully, willfully misunderstood and ignored” (Karkanias 18). The emotional investment of the fans is torn apart as their hopes for not being perceived as an insulting Becky-like stereotype
no longer withstand. The fan community was agitated and upset because their story no longer bore a character that could act as a facilitator and a role-model for their understanding. However, in *Supernatural*, fans know that even if a character is dead, one way or another, they always come.

**3.5 “Why would anybody want to watch our lives?”**

In season six, the fourth wall is shattered to pieces once again and comes tumbling down with a thundering noise in “The French Mistake” (6.15). Named after the final scene in Mel Brook’s “The Blazing Saddles,” (1974) where the action is transferred from the Old West to a Warner Brothers studio through the crashing of a wall, the episode gets its title from the song in the movie called “The French Mistake” (6.15 The French Mistake - Super-Wiki). The brothers are transported to an alternate universe to hide from an archangel that has been after them and land in the middle of a TV show that narrates their lives. In this universe, there is no magic, angels or demons, and the brothers are confronted with their lives being once again displayed for the joy of others.

During the course of the episode, Sam and Dean walk through a number of familiar rooms, which are used as sets for the show. Fans are able to recognize Bobby’s room (which is the only set that has not changed since the first season), the dragon’s lair tunnel from a previous episode called “Like A Virgin” (6.12), the spider’s lair from “Unforgiven” (6.13), and pictures taken from behind the scenes that hung around the makeup mirror. The episode also features the eight Impalas used on the show, the actors’ set chairs, various awards the show has won over the years, *Supernatural* magazines, as well as a real wedding photograph of Padalecki and his wife.
The names of the actors are also greatly satirized by themselves, mimicking early fan reactions:

Sam: We landed in some dimension where you’re Jensen Ackles, and I’m something called a “Jared Padalecki.”

Dean: So what, now you’re Polish? (6.15)

Aiming for the full nine yards, the episode also features Padaleckis’ wife who plays the demon Ruby on the fourth season, with Dean exclaiming “You married fake Ruby!” to which an ignorant Sam replies “I should figure out her name.” A real clip of Ackles from his previous work on the soap-opera Days of Our Lives also appears, as well as clips from behind the scenes of Supernatural play in the background, while the brothers investigate the actors who play them. Some of the characters featured, are drawn from real life people working on the show, such as the director, the producer, the stunt coordinator, the bodyguard, and of course the creator Erik Kripke. The show does not miss its chance to poke fun at everyone and even has Kripke be murdered by an extra, dying in this way a hero’s death.

Dean is quoting John Lennon lyrics (“No hell below us, above us only sky”), makes fun of meta-Jared for having a tanning bed calling him a “George Hamilton Dracula,” and Misha Collins (who plays Castiel) asks the writers to present him being as rude and mean as possible, completely opposite from what he is in real life. In keeping with the meta nature of the episode, Collins tweets the same tweets his character sends in the exact same time, both on the east and west coast time zones.

Other various pop culture references include an angel in a gun store killing a customer

14 The character of Bobby Singer is named after the producer Bob Singer as a joke because he is not meant to stay for more than a couple of episodes. However, Bobby becomes a fan favorite and ends up being on the show for eleven seasons, being the longest recurring character (apart from Sam and Dean).

15 The actor George Hamilton is known for having a very deep tan, and Padalecki has been seen having a rather deep tan on occasion, although he says he does not own a tanning bed.
in the same way the Terminator does in the first movie of the franchise, and Dean mocking the Archangel Raphael’s female vessel with the Aerosmith song “Dude looks like a lady.”

Being the most meta episode so far, the director declares “Season six. Moving on,” a reference he never believed would be picked up for another season. In the end when the brothers return to their dimension, Sam walks up to the viewer’s television screen and then slams the wall of the room, making sure that the (fourth) wall is once again solid and in place. “The French Mistake” is a perfect representation of Jenkins’s concept of convergence culture and hyperconsciousness, since the content of the story is fully understood and realized not only through pop culture knowledge, but also through multiple media shared by the producers with the fans and vice versa. The show, together with its fans, constitutes a big family, and it can poke and make fun of itself just as members of families do to each other. The breaking of the fourth wall facilitates this and allows both to communicate more freely and negotiate the boundaries between them.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 “Fan Fiction” and Audience Response

“Fan Fiction” aired on 11 November 2014, marking 200 episodes since the show was broadcasted. Returning to its roots in a certain way, the episode features a “monster of the week” theme, where the boys are called to solve the disappearance of a teacher, at an all-girls high school. The episode opens with the familiar sequence of “then” and “now” which usually recaps what has happened in the previous season. In between them, we see the words “Supernatural ‘Pilot’ created by Eric Kripke” before
a curtain opens and we are transported to a theatre stage. The role of Kripke is still acknowledged as a major influence in the significance of the show.

The play begins as a typical *Supernatural* episode, with a ghost, a scream, and the brothers rushing in to save the day. Only in this case, this is a recap of the story written by Marie, a fan of the “Supernatural” books, and “writer/director/actor” of “Supernatural – The Musical.” Described by her drama teacher as an “awful, unbelievable story” with no truth in it (because according to her theatre is about life and truth), she decides to cancel Marie’s production but she is attacked by a tree monster and taken away. After the teacher’s abduction, the episode cuts to its usual title card with the name of the show, only this time it features every title card *Supernatural* has ever used. Quite playful and self-referential, it has been enjoyed by all fans, and connected all the cultural discourses the show has borrowed from, for instance a burning “Western” map (like it happens in *Bonanza*), a black-and-white opening similar to the old monster movies, or a single S as in *The X-Files* opening. Certainly there are references to the show itself: an exploding wedding cake from the “Season Seven: Time for a Wedding” episode, wings that allude to Castiel, and a “Metatron” card that references the angel who has tried to take over the narrative in season nine.

When we first encounter the brothers in the episode, Dean is working on the Impala, declaring to Sam that he has found a case, that they have investigated incidents with less clues and “they [have] work to do,” a line that connects the episode with the older classic episodes of *Supernatural* from earlier seasons. Keeping true to their narrative arc, they visit the scene of the crime only to discover a theatre production is underway, and it is based on their lives. When looking for answers, they introduce themselves as FBI agents Smith and Smith, a reference to the *Die Hard*
movie where the two FBI agents are also named Johnson and are not related. This comes as a contrast to their popular aliases they use, such as “Stark and Banner” from the *Avengers*, or “Ford and Hamill” from *Star Wars*, and even Castiel’s hilarious confusion of pop culture when he calls them “Spears and Aguilera.”

The initial inspiration for the episode comes from the movie *Rushmore*, where essentially “one kid […] puts on these love letters to these movies that he loves,” which felt like the right thing to do, “to craft a love letter to the show and a love letter [to the fans]” according to the writer Robbie Thomson (*10.05 Fan Fiction - Super-Wiki*). *Supernatural* put its history on display here, as the brothers walk on the set and pass through their childhood home, their car, Bobby, Castiel, Adam, and a version of themselves. There is another recognition of the fan’s fanfiction here, or “transformative fiction” as Mary calls it, when the girls who play Sam and Dean are standing a little too close to each other. When Dean repeats his having issue with that, Marie answers she knows they are brothers, but “it’s just subtext. [..] Siobhan and Kristen are a couple in real life. Although we do explore the nature of Destiel\(^\text{16}\) in act two. [Because] you can’t spell subtext without … s-e-x,” to which Dean looks directly into the camera, breaking once again the fourth wall and showing his confusion and exasperation (10.5).

When Marie walks us through the plot of her play, which features robots, aliens, ninjas and Dean turning into a woman “just for a few scenes,\(^\text{17}\)” Dean tries to tell Marie what has really happened to the Winchesters after the Apocalypse, to which Marie laughs, calling it the worst fanfiction she has ever heard (10.5). This rift

---

\(^\text{16}\) Destiel derives from the names of Dean and Castiel and is the most popular character pairing (or ship, in fan discourse) of the show. It is the slash relationship between Dean and Castiel.

\(^\text{17}\) Another nod of the writers to a lesser known practice in fanfiction, “genderbending” where fictional characters exist in an alternate universe as their opposite sex, i.e for any given male character there is a female character and vice versa.
between the Kripke-era and the post-Kripke one, is a really important dimension for many fans, as after its fifth season *Supernatural* has lost a lot of fans who thought that the show was killing the brotherly relationship and leaving many plot holes in the narrative.

When the monster is identified as the muse Calliope from ancient Greek mythology, the brothers find out that in order to catch her, Marie’s vision needs to be realized, because Calliope feeds from the energy of the writer. Moments before the show begins, Dean gives an empowering speech to the students saying that he knows why they are all here because they love “Supernatural”:

Dean: I know I have expressed some differences of opinion, regarding this particular version of *Supernatural*. But tonight, it is all about Marie’s vision. This is Marie’s *Supernatural*. So, I want you to get out there, and I want you to stand as close as she wants you to, and I want you to put as much sub and add text, as you possibly can. There is no other road. No other way. No day, but today.

This direct acknowledgment and acceptance of fanfiction, slash writing, shipping and cosplaying, among many, as fan activities from the writers, was the biggest gift given to the fandom. Their practices may diverge from the canon of the show, but they continue to be transformative fiction, which opens a brand-new universe, created by the fans for the fans.

In its final moments, the musical comes to its conclusion with a rendition of “Carry on my Wayward Son” by Kansas, a song that has featured in multiple season finales of the show and is the closest thing *Supernatural* has to a theme song. “This melodramatic interpretation of the de facto theme is intercut with shots of the brothers
reflecting on its significance. Ultimately, the rendition is met with applause from the audience” (Herbig and Herrmann 759). *Supernatural* has this unique ability of engaging its audience in a dialogue by holding up a mirror to its production. The show recognizes that its core theme is family relations, it is what drives the show, and it is what helps the fans engage with. By breaking the fourth wall, a space is created for the fans to negotiate their position within the narrative, and for the producers to understand the power of an appropriate representation as well as reception of their audience.

### 4.2 Audience Response

In the questionnaire I have conducted using a cultural approach as demonstrated by Dennis McQuail in his book *Audience Analysis*, I aim to understand the meaning of a proper representation of the fandom and its use in the context of the narrative, as well as in the media, by fans of *Supernatural* themselves. The aim of a cultural approach in audience research, is to determine whether audiences understand the meaning of the content they receive, and its use in a context, through the means of a survey (McQuail 21). The purpose of a cultural approach aims towards the understanding of the media text via its audience’s perception. Audiences are no longer regarded as a passive mass incapable of critical thinking. They read and perceive a media text through various lenses, and often form smaller “interpretive’ communities” that give and share the different meaning of a text (McQuail 19. The following survey is also descriptive since some of the answers are open-ended.

The questionnaire has been uploaded to the Greek Facebook page of *Supernatural* that fans called “Supernatural Greece” and on my personal Tumblr blog,
via Google Surveys. Precisely 100 people replied to it, over the course of the two weeks that it was available. I will present the graphs and pie charts of some indicative responses, demonstrating how my previous arguments are evident and are also integrated in fandom discourse.

The majority of the responses came from Greek fans, comprising a 52% of the overall result. I began with general questions concerning the age, gender and educational levels of the participants.

The majority of fans in Greece are female, as it is also the case in American media. 48% of the participants are aged between 18-25, and 24% are 26-35 years old, demonstrating that the target audience of the show are young people who have either recently started watching the show, or are fans that have been watching it for over a decade now. 36% of them are university or college students, 25% are high school students and 16% have a university or Bachelor’s degree.

---

18 A link for the survey can be found here  
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1fpVgiVKbc1Xyi6mzDCJqDZ9iGn2Tq2eGnQJvBozHlQ/closedform
In the question of how long they have been watching the show, and that are their viewing habits, it is obvious that their answers attest to the (neo)religious aspect I have discussed in a previous section.

A striking 52% mentions that they watch the show for its horror and fantasy elements, a 38% because someone has recommended it, and a 38% because of the protagonists, who declare, at least the majority of them, that they identify with Dean’s character (47%).
The narrative is something that makes the fans return to the show each season. In the question “what has kept you coming back to *Supernatural,*” 56% have answered because of the story and the narrative arc, something that proves that *Supernatural* has not lost its interest even after thirteen seasons. 46% watches the show because it has become a ritual now, a practice met in cult shows as I have argued before, while a 32% does so because of the fandom.

When asked about the fandom of the show, 50% answered that they find it a little wild, but they like it. 28% of them actively participates in the fandom by writing fanfiction, blogging about it, creating fanart, videos and cosplaying, while only 22% answered they do not participate in any fandom related events, they just watch the show.
Moreover, the production of intertextual texts is done by a small number of fans, but it is followed by the majority of it. Only 16% revealed that they write fanfiction, 14% engage in Cosplay, 18% create fan-videos, but 52% consume fan-made content.

When asked about giving their opinion on the episode “FanFiction,” I left the answers open-ended, because I did not want to direct the participants into giving a desirable answer for me, rather I wanted to hear their honest uncensored opinion. I did, however, have a follow-up question of whether fans have a power over the material presented in the show. The greatest part of them enjoyed the episode very much and claimed that only Supernatural could do an episode like this and get away with it. In fact, a lot of them expected an episode like that to be made for a long time and got very emotional with the appearance of past characters, especially Bobby and Chuck. One comment perfectly summarizes what most of them have written:

Fans have the power to put the car in drive but the writers are essentially the people who steer. We point them in a direction and they take it as an idea and use it to create something more. To me, fanfiction
was a great episode with that sided with the personality of a typical fangirl. Obviously we aren't all going to get our wishes but we still have the power to create. I think it was a really progressive episode. It told us fans that it is okay to create something more than just the show. It gave me the sense that we, the fandom, are being heard and acknowledged. (anonymous)

An astonishing 78% of the fans are happy with the way they are represented in the show, showing that the reciprocal relationship between producers, text, and receiver is not only successful, but also an ongoing one for the past decade and more. This signifies that the relationship between Writer and Observer is indeed an interactive one, shaped by the fandom. Even though not many of them found many similarities between themselves and the girls on the show, the main idea of fans as avid supporters of a show they love and as creators of a new intertextual content was not only familiar but greatly appreciated.

Most of the fans do not find their depiction as fans represented in an excessive manner, however, when done so, they understand, is for comedic purposes and that the image does not follow reality, as is Becky’s example. Most of them believe that the character of Becky is meant to be the comedy relief of the show but it ended up being a very poor one. 64% of them are aware of the fact that media often exaggerates what fandom is and, as a result, the actions of a few people will always get more attention than the actions of the collective fandom.
The final question aims to the personal fandom experience, asking how do fans feel when they identify themselves as fans of a cultural product (a TV show, a book or a movie), with 58% claiming it makes them happy, 45% revealing that sometimes it makes them feel awkward depending on the group they are interacting with, while 11% keep their fan identity hidden, and 2% are embarrassed.

It seems that a portion of fans still differentiates themselves from the group, making themselves the “other,” while fortunately more than half are delighted with their fan identity. As Zubernis and Larsen note, “Fandom is something to be indulged in. Something that makes us feel good” (64). And as curators of popular culture, so it should.
Epilogue

For as long as cultural commodities are being produced and there are things to love, there will be fans. They have not always been treated charitably, described with terms as obsessive and socially awkward. However, fandom now has been increasingly celebrated and supported. To be a fan is to be interested, excited, devoted and knowledgeable about a piece of the world we live in. To be a member of a fandom should not be frowned upon or met with negative stereotypical images of quiet people wearing big glasses, who are not particularly well-spoken and enjoy Cosplay and fantasy literature. Nerd culture is not middle-school bullying material in an 80s movie anymore, instead the audience is now considered to be a “patron of [a] text” (Robson 211).

Particularly, Supernatural’s audience is challenged to navigate through uncanny plots and subplots including multiple realities, doppelgangers, dream sequences, and the occult. The viewer is the creator of meaning, and the journey is far more emphasized than the destination. The interest in the uncanny does not just revolve around stories that are an enigma to resolve, but also into a larger place where we are initiated into who’s nature is to be explored.

Fandom culture is made and ruled by the community itself and is fueled by its passion towards specific cultural products or creations. Fans compose original transformative works based on the material they feel a certain closeness to. This does not only give them the position of the curator of cultural artifacts and commodities, it also makes them the preservers and the ones with a certain kind of responsibility to promote these cultural artifacts for future generations. This work they do out of love, devotion and passion, and thus they deserve a proper representation in the media.
As important an appropriate and decent portrayal of fandom culture is, there are also other aspects that could be examined. As fandom grows, so does their influence on the production of a text. From dictating finales, or character involvements, to maybe casting of actors, they are able to assemble entirely new properties within the production of a text. The reciprocal fan/producer relationship is already a major topic of discussion in academia.

However, another important aspect that needs to be brought forward is fan-works and their significance in legality. As Henry Jenkins has discussed, fan-works such as fanfiction, fan-videos, and fanart both celebrate and criticize the original text. While fans enjoy the original work, what they do in their own work, is address and reconstruct aspects of the story in which they have found flaws or gaps. Nonetheless, their work exists in uncharted territory, because it is built under copyrighted material. The future of fan-produced works under copyright laws is a serious issue that justifies its own research. Discussion should be centered on how much transformative a fan-produced work is, where does plagiarism end and where does the original work of the fan begin. The more fan-works exist, the more opportunities producers have to reference fan-works in their own texts as well. People join fandoms out of love and their work should be deemed as a legitimate and creative activity. It is the “Age of the Geek,” and it is high time for fandom culture to be universally accepted and celebrated.
Works Cited

10.05 Fan Fiction - Super-Wiki.


6.15 The French Mistake - Super-Wiki.


Dean Winchester – Super-Wiki.


“Fact Scarier than Fiction | Daily Telegraph.” Daily Telegraph, 2007,


Fernandez, Maria Elena. “On the Road Trip from Hell.” The Age, 2006,


---. *Supernatural: First Impressions.*


Kripke, Eric, creator. *Supernatural.* Warner Bros Television, 2005–.


doi:10.1080/15295038709360136.


