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Popping (it) Up: an exploration on popular culture and TV series Supernatural

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Abstract | *Supernatural* is a TV series created in 2005 that draws inspiration from urban legends, folklore and mythological tales to tell the journey of two brothers who hunt monsters, ghosts and creatures from the underworld in an apocalyptic scenario. This article intends to explore *Supernatural* as a reflection of/on the present time, its main concerns and practices. First, it analyzes the show as part of a post-9/11 culture that is deeply affected by the events of 2001 and the underlying sense of terror. Even though the show privileges the horror genre as a framework to deal with 9/11-ensued fears and anxieties, it also brings into play many other genres that blur its categorization and reproduce today's fast pace and fluidity. Second, the article looks at how the show integrates and has been integrated into contemporary pop culture. *Supernatural* is known for pushing the boundaries, communicating with other cultural products, self-referencing and interacting with the audience, thus fostering an active interchange between the show, pop culture products, different media, and viewers. The article therefore understands *Supernatural* as both a cultural manifestation and a manifestation of culture, a product that impacts popular culture and is, in turn, impacted by it. It investigates how the present social, cultural and political context in America has influenced the creation of the series and its plot, and how the use of popular culture references, which pop up regularly throughout the show and create a sublayer of meaning the viewer must decode and interpret, has become a distinctive characteristic of the show and a key factor for its success and durability.

Keywords | *Supernatural*, popular culture, television, TV series, America, (post-) 9/11, (post-) apocalypse

The Road So Far

Television can be perceived as a site of reflection of/on contemporary society, either in the form of news programs or reality TV, game shows, award ceremonies, movies, soap operas and series. However, it does not play a mere passive role, having also a part in constituting society and affecting culture. TV series, for example, namely those set in the present, not only constitute a place to discuss about everyday life but they also become part of it (and, in some cases, influence it: e.g. creating new trends in social behavior). CW's *Supernatural*, created by Eric Kripke in 2005,[1] is an example of this double function of serials, in the sense that it both showcases a world in turmoil and danger, evocative of present-day terrorism-induced anxieties and insecurities, and integrates what can be described as a post-9/11 culture, deeply marked, on the one hand, by the events of 2001 and synonymous to a culture of fear[2] and, on the other, by a participatory impulse and an incredibly fast and extensive flow of information.

Drawing inspiration from familiar urban legends, folklore and mythology, *Supernatural* revolves around two brothers, Dean and Sam Winchester, played by Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, respectively, who travel across the United States hunting creatures from the supernatural realm: monsters, ghosts, vampires, shapeshifters, werewolves, witches, pagan gods or even angels and demons. They are modern-day vigilantes or avengers that try to free the world from evil, thus fueling an instant analogy with the American crusade-like effort against terror(ism) "to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world" (Bush, 2001b). Despite privileging a

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[1] *Supernatural* first premiered in WB and was later integrated into newly formed CW.

[2] See Frank Furedi (2002). The original version of the book (1997) precedes 9/11 but, as the author explains in the preface of this revised edition, written the day after the terrorist attack, the discussion about fear is both relevant and current.

horror-related thematic, the show is nevertheless characterized for combining various genres and showcasing a continuous playful game with genre conventions, intertextuality and metafiction, which grant originality and a certain edginess to the show, as well as momentarily break down the 'fourth wall' and transport the viewer to the world outside the screen. *Supernatural*'s success and longevity owes massively, in fact, to the use of popular culture references and a constant dialogue with contemporary society, cultural products and agents. This not only confers a specific tone to the series (ranging from serious to humoristic) but also helps bridge fiction and reality, hence establishing the show's contemporariness. These references are employed as a tool to complement or develop the plot, identify characters, set the mood and pace of the scenes as well as, on an extradiegetic level, appeal to a broader audience. They pop up regularly throughout the show and are usually employed by the authors as inspiration for the title of an episode or directly built into the story, either as sound, background image or characters' lines.

In this article, I will depart from a study of the social, political and cultural context that led to the creation of *Supernatural* (and other similar works) to investigate how popular culture impacts on the world of the show. I will look into how that context is incorporated into the series not only through its storyline but also through the use of pop culture references, which both create and reinforce a sense of community amongst viewers, while simultaneously cementing the show's place in today's popular culture. In short, I will inquire into *Supernatural*'s place in contemporary pop culture and discuss how pop culture has influenced both the show itself and its reception.

Post-Apocalypse Now

As previously mentioned, *Supernatural* is strongly influenced by the horror film tradition; yet, the show also mixes various genres such as fantasy, drama, thriller, the road movie and comedy, that at times seem to be at odds with that primary label. Stacey Abbott, for instance, defines *Supernatural* as a "curious hybrid of horror, western, and melodrama" (Abbott, 2011: xv), thus bringing attention to the kaleidoscopic nature of the show, which plays with and blends many different visual and narrative strategies. Nevertheless, the most common label attributed to this long-running serial is still 'horror' most notably due to its thematic but also its aesthetics.[3]

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[3] Joseph Valezano III and Erika Engstrom claim that "[t]he aesthetic quality of the series borrows from the horror genre; filmed in dark, muted colors, the action often occurs during nightime and settings include haunted houses, cemeteries, and crypts. Special effects associated with monsters and ghosts, such as blood,

Nevertheless, in spite of this, it can be argued that *Supernatural* does not fully comply with the traditional description of horror as a cinematographic genre.

The strategy of blending multiple genres is neither new nor unique, considering the limitations imposed by television upon shows that do not fit into mainstream categorizations. The horror genre has had a difficult transition from film to TV, mainly due to the many restrictions the latter medium entails – from program production to the type of network, censorship, publicity, scheduling, and audience – which may contribute to reducing its visibility and academic value.[4] Cinema has in fact been deemed the most suitable place for horror, whilst TV has been perceived as a "para-site", "a cultural site that is assumed to be alien to the genre and a space where horror supposedly does not belong" (Hills, 2005: 111). The instable relationship between horror and television has in turn led to the blurring of the boundaries between horror and other genres, namely the Gothic, so that a specific show may get a more positive response, "with 'Gothic TV' functioning as a discursive other to TV horror, the latter being associated with gore and low culture, and the former carrying connotations of historical tradition, and 'restrained' suggestion or implication rather than graphic monstrosity and splatter" (Hills, 2005: 120). Networks and producers therefore often tone down their product in order to avoid alienating a large segment of TV viewers. However, changes in the media industry and viewing practices need to be acknowledged as well when thinking about the growing presence of horror on television, for example: the emergence of subscription channels, which have broadened what is considered acceptable; technological advances that have decreased the distance between the quality one verifies in terms of image and special effects on big and small screen; and the instigation of fan participation (Jowett and Abbott, 2013).

Initially, the creators of *Supernatural* tried to package and present each episode as the horror movie of the week. For that, they resorted to American folklore and urban legends, recapturing the well-known stories of Bloody Mary, the vanishing hitchhiker, the woman in white, Hookman or the frightening Scarecrow. Despite their unreal

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apparitions, mythical creatures like vampires and shapeshifters, and 'black smoke' representing demons that possess humans, further define the series as decidedly dark" (Valezano III and Engstrom, 2014: 555).

[4] In his study about horror, Matt Hills points out that academic works about this genre often focus only on film, neglecting its presence as a TV category (Hills, 2005: 112). Even though genre categorization serves the purpose of bringing together works that share similar features; this classification process tends to be more difficult with television, which does not lend itself to broad categories like literature does (Feuer, 1992: 138). Here, genre categorization is not confined to the media text itself but, instead, "operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts" (Mittell, 2004: xii). The hybrid essence of television does not allow for well-defined, self-contained genres, and, in the case of TV horror, it "exists as a nexus of often conflicting influences and factors" (Jowett and Abbott, 2013), which explains the complexity that accompanies the labeling of shows such as *Supernatural*.

essence, making use of these fantastic narratives that are profoundly ingrained in American collective psyche paradoxically brings a sense of plausibility, authenticity and familiarity to the story being told. As producer Robert Singer puts it, their main goal when choosing them was to ground the episodes and storylines on easily recognizable and 'googable' legends (Amatangelo, 2005). These legends and urban myths are stories the audience has heard of before or that they can look up without difficulty.

If we take into account the fact that *Supernatural* appeared only four years after 9/11, at a time when the US were fully committed to waging war against terror, it may be argued that the theme of the show and the evolution of the narrative arc toward an apocalyptic scenario that features an ongoing battle between angels and demons is but a darkly fantasized representation of the post-9/11 American society, the deeply religiously influenced governmental narrative and the always latent discourse of good versus evil. The story can thus be perceived as an allegory of post-9/11 America, constantly fighting their demons and other threatening forces.[5] Confirming this, Eric Kripke claims that the legends used in the show are "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" (Fernandez, 2005). An age when America "saw evil" and, as the self-proclaimed "brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world" (Bush, 2001b), was forced to respond to it.

9/11 has been described by many scholars, journalists, politicians and common citizens as a defining event, a watershed moment in history that divides time between a pre and post-9/11 era (Dudziak, 2003). From this perspective, it signals the transition from the fairly politically uneventful 1990s (at least from the American viewpoint) to a new century, marked by a constant state of terror, uncertainty, insecurity and fear (of the unknown). A fear that resulted in the US acknowledging their own vulnerabilities but also in drawing and implementing highly controversial new plans to avoid a similar

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[5] In recent years, a renewed interest for horror as a means to reflect (on) the dark present-day times has been particularly noticeable. However, as Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller explain in the introductory chapter of *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, the attention the horror genre has received after 9/11 has been contradictory to say the least. On the one hand, some doubted that people would adhere to it after such tragedy, claiming that they would not want to relive the 'real' horror they had experienced in 2001. On the other, some saw it as the most suitable genre for representing 9/11 and its aftermath since it allows us to reexamine society from a safe standpoint where "the fundamental rules of our own reality no longer apply—the dead do not stay dead, skyscraper-sized monsters crawl out of the Hudson River, vampires fall in love with humans" (Briefel and Miller, 2011: 3). The idea of *Supernatural* as a metaphor for an America that faces the unknown and defeats any threat is also shared by Joseph M. Valenzano III and Erika Engstrom in "Cowboys, Angels, and Demons. American Exceptionalism and the Frontier Myth in the CW's *Supernatural*" (2014). They liken the Winchester brothers and their story to "modern-day manifestations of traditional frontier myth heroes" (Valenzano III and Engstrom, 2014: 558), thus viewing the show as an opportunity to reflect on American history and identity.

tragedy: from changes in security and surveillance (that blur the lines between safety and privacy) to the adoption of a preemptive war against an elusive enemy: terror(ism).

As is common knowledge, mass media – i.e. television, press, radio and the Internet – played a central role during and immediately after 9/11, embarking on a 24/7 coverage that turned the catastrophic moment into a "media event" (Dayan and Katz, 1994). Called into action from the very start, media, especially TV, took upon themselves the responsibility of not only transmitting and explaining the sequence of events to those watching the news, but also of presenting that information in an over-dramatized way as a "public drama" (Monahan, 2010: 9) that would close the gap between reality and fiction and, in the end, appeal to and entertain a higher number of people as "the ultimate 'spectacle of the real'" (King, 2005: 13). Other than mass media, the arts also attempted at finding an appropriate response to such an extraordinary event by means of reproducing the way 9/11 was experienced, covered and seen, or by rendering their own version of the events. Literature, film and visual arts for example, raced to convey and rearrange the story of 9/11. Yet, despite the important contribution of other areas, for the purpose of this article, I will focus on how cinema and TV have dealt with 9/11, and how they have helped build the cultural imagination of (post-)9/11.

Even though it can be argued that Hollywood has not engaged seriously in dealing with 9/11,[6] the influence of the terrorist attack over the type of movies and TV series produced in the last almost decade and a half (both in terms of visual imagery and plot) is still nevertheless evident. In fact, this period has witnessed a rising number of movies featuring (post-)apocalyptic and dystopian scenarios, as well as a supernatural thematic that both mirrors and subverts reality to some extent. Indeed, if we take a look at what has been produced and released since 2002, a boom of stories about destroyed landscapes and disintegrated political systems after a big fallout symbolically analogous to 9/11 or about otherwordly creatures (vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and zombies) is very noticeable.

The constant state of war we have lived in since 9/11, along with anxieties about the future, have largely inspired the sizeable number of post-apocalyptic dystopian science fiction that has invaded bookstores and movie theaters, and even television.

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[6] Apart from documentaries or semi-fictionalized movies (which mix both real footage and stories with fictional ones) that have discussed and analyzed 9/11, we have Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) and Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006) as the main flagships of movies that directly address both the drama at Ground Zero and inside the airplanes. Other than that, however, the majority of the movies that may be connected with 9/11 only use it as a contextualization device (to clarify that the story happens before or after 2001) or a drama boosting device (sometimes even without a real connection with the plot – the reference to 9/11 coming out of nowhere and only employed to heighten the dramatic effect). Instead, movies about the War on Terror, such as critically acclaimed *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), have gained terrain in recent years, relegating cinematic versions of 9/11 to a secondary place.

From stories about alien invasions to catastrophic events or global wars, many are the topics that set a foundation for these works.[7] Even though this type of narrative traditionally targets an older audience,[8] youngsters have become a preferential consumer of many of these fictional works that present a futuristic fantasized version of contemporary society. In literature, the Young Adult category has in fact developed into a harbor for this type of stories, concocting a large number of books based on postbellum times and landscapes, many of which have, in turn, been adapted to film.[9] Take the widely known (and successful) examples of the *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, or *The Maze Runner* series. These allegoric explorations of post-9/11 America are representative of the large amount of books/films that have emerged in recent years. They depart from a sense of looming doom and inevitable catastrophe to reimagine (the American) society in the future, thus proving Mathias Nilges's idea that "representations of destruction grow in number and popularity especially in times of (national) political, moral, and psychological uncertainty" (Nilges, 2010: 23). However, instead of presenting a utopian vision of the world, where humans are able to learn from past mistakes and eradicate evil, the message that comes across is precisely the opposite. In very general terms, they portray imperfect and unbalanced societies that have surfaced from disaster or a devastating war and failed to escape humanity's many flaws, namely the thirst for ever-ending power and domination, the objection to difference, and the refusal of independent-thinking. The societies they create are essentially based on conformity – citizens being forced to live, behave and think in a certain way – and exclusion – societies being divided according to people's traits, interests or aptitudes, thus resulting in a more homogeneous and passive unit.[10] According to James Aston and John Walliss, on the contrary to typical apocalypse

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[7] See, for example, *Cloverfield* (2008), *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), and *I am Legend* (2007), which depict New York as a damaged city, or as the stage of catastrophe; or *The Happening* (2008), and *World War Z* (2013) that deal with a pandemic scenario that threatens to extinguish the human race. Despite the attention the genre has gathered in Hollywood, just like horror, the apocalyptic thematic has also experienced a very complex relationship with television for similar reasons (i.e. its graphic nature and its usually lower quality when compared to cinema). Charles P. Mitchell even goes to the extent of claiming that "[t]he apocalyptic genre is generally not well suited to television except for telefilms and the occasional mini-series" (Mitchell, 2001: 283). Yet, as shows such as *Jericho*, *Revolution*, *Falling Skies*, *The 100* or *Under the Dome* attest, television has clearly insisted on tapping into it.

[8] Cf. George Orwell's *1984*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

[9] Cecelia Goodnow argues that the success of these dystopian narratives comes from the fact that they reflect "a world beset by some of the most frightening problems in recent memory, from climate change to terrorism and the shredding of privacy and free will" (Goodnow, 2008). Moira Young adds that, besides reflecting society, they also mirror teenagers' struggles (Young, 2011). For other discussions about the popularity of dystopian stories, see also Donston-Miller, (2014), Sarner (2013), and Miller (2010).

[10] In the majority of these stories, society is split into groups – from districts (*The Hunger Games*) to factions (*Divergent*), sectors (*Legend*), or castes (*The Selection*) – almost hermetically closed and completely separated from one another, encasing people with common characteristics.

movies from the 90s, where the salvation of humanity was expected, in these, "destruction is not averted and there is the sense that (...) events are likely going to become a lot worse. Indeed, the post-9/11 movies posit scenarios where science, technology and the government are, at best, powerless against the apocalyptic forces, and at worse willingly complicit with them" (Aston and Walliss, 2013).

As far as the stories about the supernatural are concerned, I borrow from Susannah Clements's description of the vampire as an ever-changing metaphor that adapts to culture's worldview and interests (Clements, 2011) to claim that the appeal behind the resurgence of these figures (not only vampires but other underworld creatures as well) lies in the desire to explore the human condition, its deepest fears and yearnings. In a time when the threat of a terrorist attack is still very present – and the fact that the idea of terrorists as 'preying' on innocents has unleashed an almost predatory chase of the perpetrators of 9/11, with former US President George W. Bush ordering terrorists to be hunt down (Bush, 2001a), therefore dehumanizing or demonizing them and endowing them with an animalistic quality –, the recovery of these hybrid and living-dead creatures feeds the need to give a face to ones' fears and also divert the public from the 'true' monsters. These fictional characters and their stories are a fantasized version of the 'real' monsters that inhabit today's world but they can also function as an escape from reality, where their actions do not have any real repercussions. Following the success of the *Twilight* saga, literature, cinema and television have focused on producing works that either romanticize these creatures or present a darker version of them. From *True Blood* to *The Vampire Diaries* (and now its spin-off *The Originals*), to the more teenage-oriented *Teen Wolf*, or *IZombie*, *Z Nation* and the mega-hit *The Walking Dead*. They all offer a fictionalized version of reality, where humans and non-humans coexist, either relatively peacefully or in a constant state of war. This interest with both dystopian scenarios and the monstrous, undead or ghostly figures that hound and haunt innocents also brings to mind the "spectral life" (Redfield, 2009) of catastrophe and acts of violence. They serve as a reminder that the impact of these events widely surpasses the moment they take place; instead, they linger, both physically by means of destroyed landscapes, and psychologically by means of what people remember.[11]

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[11] Marc Redfield, in his study about 9/11 and the War on Terror distinguishes between the literal and the symbolic 9/11, calling attention to the enduring quality of the latter. "The event called September 11 or 9/11 was as real as death, but its traumatic force seems nonetheless inseparable from a certain ghostliness, not just because the attacks did more than merely literal damage (that would be true of any event causing cultural trauma) but because the symbolic damage done itself seems spectral—not unreal by any means, but not simply 'real' either" (Redfield, 2009: 15).

Supernatural is therefore in line with a series of works that tackle contemporary concerns and provide a narrative to what is happening in the world, thus composing what can be called 'post-9/11 (popular) culture'.[12] However, as I will demonstrate next, the connection between this particular show and the reality we live in is not circumscribed to its post-9/11 thematic. Indeed, the show reinforces its contemporariness by engaging in a very notorious dialogue with other cultural products and agents, and even its fans. The show openly plays with popular culture and its role as a pop culture product, hence shortening the distance between fiction and reality (story and history).

The Hunters' Games

Despite the obvious tribute and debt to the horror genre and its resurgence in the last few years, as well as the sense of relevance and currentness the story entails when compared to the post-9/11 period, the use of popular culture references has been appointed as one of the main reasons behind the success of *Supernatural*, which is in its 10th season, with an 11th already confirmed. When referring to popular culture, I use the more general, broader definition of the term, which describes it as everyday culture (Fedorak, 2009) intended for mass consumption (Storey, 2009) that helps understand how cultures and societies work and individuals interact (Hoppenstand, 2003). As Lawrence Grossberg puts it, "what makes something popular is its popularity" (Grossberg, 2006: 582). I therefore understand popular culture as cultural manifestations of everyday life that both reflect today's society and its interests, and are enjoyed and recognized by a large number of people. In the case of *Supernatural*, and in light of this attempted definition, it can be argued that the show is both part of pop culture and an enthusiastic consumer of it.

References to pop culture – movies, TV shows, characters and actors; songs, bands and singers; celebrities and fans – appear regularly throughout *Supernatural* creating a subtext that viewers are called upon to identify and decode. They pop up often and in manifold ways: 1) used as inspiration for episode titles;[13] 2) integrated

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[12] See Quay and Damico (2010) and Birkenstein, Froula and Randell (2010) for discussions about (post-)9/11 popular culture.

[13] *Supernatural*'s authors often find inspiration in music, film and television for episode titles. Some examples are Johnny Cash's *Folsom Prison Blues* (2x19), Whitney Houston's *I Believe the Children are Our Future* (5x06), Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (5x16), Jay-Z's *99 Problems* (5x17), Madonna's *Like a Virgin* (6x12), and Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On* (6x17); also, *The Magnificent Seven* (3x01), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (4x09), *There Will be Blood* (7x22), *Remember the Titans* (8x16), *Taxi Driver* (8x19), as well as *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* ("The Curious Case of Dean Winchester",

directly into the story by slipping in names of artists, characters, songs, movies or TV shows;[14] 3) quoting catchphrases or describing a specific scene from another TV show or movie;[15] 4) and, alluding to common everyday items, brands and activities.[16]

The first episode, "Pilot" (1x01), which serves as an introduction to *Supernatural*'s story and its characters, also constitutes an introduction to the use of pop culture in the show. For example, not only is Dean and Sam's relationship – which is arguably the most important element in this TV series – explained in opposition to another famous TV family, the Brady bunch to be more exact, when Sam says: "We're not exactly the Bradys"; but the brothers also often resort to fake names when introducing themselves in a new case. Their aliases are usually drawn from their favorite movie and rock stars – as agents Ford and Hamill (referring to *Star Wars* leading figures) or fathers Simmons and Frehley (referring to the members of famous rock band Kiss). In this particular episode, Dean introduces himself as Ted Nugent and, making fun of two FBI agents, he calls them agents Mulder and Scully (in a direct allusion to *The X-Files*).[17]

5x07), *Girl Interrupted* ("Sam, interrupted", 5x11), *Live Free or Die Hard* ("Live Free or Twihard", 6x05), *The Bourne Identity* ("The Born-Again Identity", 7x17), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* ("The Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo", 7x20), *Blade Runner* ("Blade Runners", 9x16), and *The Hunger Games* ("The Hunter Games", 10x10); and finally, *Two and a Half Man* (6x02*), Family Matters* (6x07), and *The Mentalist* ("The Mentalists", 7x7).

[14] Take the example of "My Heart Will Go On" (6x17). In this episode, the angel Balthazar decides to unsink the Titanic and triggers a butterfly effect that forces Fate to take action and reclaim the souls of those who should have never been born. As a result, the Titanic is no longer a famous ship because she never sunk, James Cameron's movie was never made and Celine Dion is, according to Balthazar, "a destitute lounge singer somewhere in Quebec". Besides obvious references to Dion's song, which Balthazar loathes, Cameron's movie is also used to justify his decision to change history. When Dean questions Balthazar about his reasons for unsinking the ship, he answers: "Because I hated the movie". "What movie" Dean asks. "Exactly". However, this is not a unique situation within *Supernatural*'s world. Allusions to artists are in fact frequent, with constant references to actors and musicians. Jack Nicholson, for example, is often mentioned by Dean as "my man Jack" (along with references to *The Shining* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest*); on the other hand, the names of rock band members are turned into aliases by the Winchester brothers (e.g. Metallica, Led Zeppelin, Kiss, ACDC, and Van Halen). Also mentioned are TV personalities (from Oprah to Dr. Phil, Martha Stewart, or even the Kardashians), and movies or TV Shows (from *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* to *MTV Cribs* and *Punk'd*).

[15] We have the examples of *A Few Good Men*'s "You Can't Handle the Truth" (6x06), and *The Wonderful World of Oz*'s "There's no Place Like Home" (10x11), in which quotes from movies are turned into episode titles; but there are numerous other situations throughout *Supernatural* where characters quote from other TV shows and movies or make reference to iconic lines, namely, *The Sixth Sense* ("Let me know if you see any dead people, Haley Joel", 1x10), *Taxi Driver* ("You talking to me? Are you talking to me?", 2x19), *The Shinning* ("Here's Johnny!", 3x01), *Seven* ("What's in the box?", 3x01), *Forrest Gump* ("Run, Forrest, Run!", 4x08), *Dirty Dancing* ("Nobody puts baby in a corner", 7x06), and *E.T. the Extraterrestrial* ("E.T. goes home", 8x23).

[16] From social media (MySpace, Facebook and Twitter) to games (Pac-Man, X-Box, or even Simon Says, which inspires the title of episode 2x05, and also many TV commercials.

[17] The Winchesters usually introduce themselves as members of US governmental agencies and departments. That is the case of Homeland Security in "Phantom Traveler" (1x04), which creates an instant connection with post-9/11 society.

The importance of the soundtrack is also tackled right in the first episode. Music, especially rock/heavy metal,[18] plays a crucial role in the story, functioning almost as a third protagonist, alongside the black 1967 Chevy Impala, the muscle car the duo drives and works as setting for most of the drama.[19] In fact, both the music and the car, which do not fit into mainstream patterns of what is considered cool or up to date, are representative of Sam and Dean's roles as outcasts, as heroes that save the world from the margins. The music and the car are indeed but a reflection of how the Winchesters were raised, having been denied the all-American white picket fence lifestyle and growing up on the side of the road in motels, fast-food restaurants, bars and cafés. Their way of life and their tastes mirror their unconventional upbringing and reinforce their role as unconventional heroes, equipped only with run out weapons, a few spells and tricks, and an old journal-like book they inherited from their father containing a lifetime of research about the paranormal. It is interesting, nevertheless, that it is Dean, who initially has no knowledge about social media and loves rock music and classic cars (and hence comes across as a walking advertisement for 80s lifestyle),[20] and not Sam (who actually left the hunting life behind and briefly attended college), that seems to be more in tune with pop culture. Going through the episodes, one rapidly realizes that most of the allusions and comic statements regarding pop culture come from the older brother. If, on the one hand, Sam is mostly described as the intelligent and methodical brother, generally associated with book knowledge and therefore considered a living encyclopedia of history, urban legends and American lore; Dean, on the other hand, contrasting with his manly attitudes, his musical choices and his knowledge about classic horror movies, is an avid consumer of TV and cinema, with a secret obsession for daytime TV, chick flicks and tear-jerkers.

Music is not, however, only used as a background effect but it also takes an active role in telling the story. Rock songs from the 60s up to the 80s recurrently act as narrator, revealing to the spectator what has happened thus far – "the road so far" as it

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[18] Symbolic of resistance and rebellion, according to Deena Weinstein, the sound of heavy metal also provides a sense of empowerment "expressed as sheer volume" (Weinstein, 2000: 23).

[19] Much has been written about the role of the Impala in *Supernatural*, and especially in relation to the older Winchester brother, Dean. According to Valenzano III and Engstrom, who describe the Winchesters as modern cowboys, the Impala "takes the form of the modern day horse" (Valenzano III and Engstrom, 2014: 559), assisting the brothers in their quest. In this sense, horse is replaced by horsepower, preserving nevertheless a typically masculine quality. Cf. Melissa N. Bruce (2010) and Susan A. George (2014) for analyses of the Impala as symbol of masculinity.

[20] In the first episode, for instance, Sam questions Dean's music taste and confronts him by saying:
"Sam: I swear, man, you've got to update your cassette tape collection.
Dean: Why?
Sam: Well, for one, they're cassette tapes. And two: Black Sabbath? Motorhead? Metallica? It's the greatest hits of mullet rock" (1x01).

is expressed in the show – but also implying what may lie ahead. A specific song that embodies this almost to perfection is "Carry On My Wayward Son" by Kansas, which may be considered an almost-theme song of *Supernatural*.

> Chorus:
> Carry on my wayward son
> There'll be peace when you are done
> Lay your weary head to rest
> Don't you cry no more (Kansas)

First used in episode 21 of the first season, it was later adopted as a summing up or recap device for the brothers' journey in the finale episodes of each season. This song works as a reminder of the construction of the narrative arc as a journey. The brothers are always pursuing someone or something: their father, a case, a creature. They fight for their lives, their loved ones, and eventually, the world, trying to avoid apocalypse. Yet, as Stacey Abbott observes, that is not the only journey the show explores: "*Supernatural* is [also] part of a longer journey through the horror tradition, building upon what has come before" (Abbott, 2011: xi). Creators and characters often acknowledge the legacy of previous similar shows or movies and highlight their enormous influence on the construction and unfolding of *Supernatural*'s story: from *The X-Files* to *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* or *Angel*; and the classics *The Exorcist*, *Poltergeist*, *Psycho* and *The Shining*. This brings to light the idea that (popular) culture is cumulative, that it is not closed upon itself but, instead, that cultural products communicate amongst themselves and build upon each other.

    Still, in contrast to what Abbott suggests, I would rather emphasize that *Supernatural* also draws from various narratives and genres other than its own. Despite the importance of its horror heritage, the show borrows from other genres (as mentioned before) and a large collection of popular cultural references that are in some way related to the theme and storyline of each episode. In fact, it can be argued that three of *Supernatural*'s strengths are – apart from the plot itself and familial relationship it conveys, which appeals to a large portion of the audience – the writers' ability to: first, dialogue with other cultural products, especially contemporary ones; second, be humorously self-referential, commenting on and making fun of the show itself and its intervenients; and third, interact with its fan base, thus refusing the idea of viewers as passive participants and giving them a voice within the show.[21] In order to

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[21] The notion of the fan has been studied by many scholars over the years. Even though there is not a formal definition for it, the idea of the fan as someone who develops an affective relationship with the

discuss the playful game with intertextuality and metafiction that distinguishes this TV series, also enriching it and bringing it closer to reality, I will now analyze some representative episodes of these three strategies.

Starting with the first one, the dialogic relationship between the show and other popular culture products is an intrinsic part of *Supernatural*. The two main characters (especially but not exclusively) often compare the situations they are in, the people they meet or the objects they come across with what they have seen on television, listened to on the radio, or browsed on the web. References to other TV shows and movies, especially direct competitors – either in terms of thematic, genre or timeslot – are very frequent,[22] as well as the allusion to characters in movies, celebrities, music bands and songs, and so on. This is particularly noticeable in episodes whose storyline and imagery openly play with other movies and movie genres. In "Monster Movie" (4x5), for example, the brothers investigate a series of murders whose circumstances resemble those of classic Hollywood horror movies. This episode has the particularity of being shot all black and white and designed to replicate the classic horror movie layout. Also, in "Frontierland"[23] (6x18) the Winchesters are sent to the old West to retrieve the ashes of a phoenix. The episode explicitly plays with iconic imagery and discourse usually associated to the Western[24] while, at the same time, establishing a permanent link with a cult movie that has done the same thing previously, i.e. *Back to the Future*. One more example is "Time After Time" (7x12), in which Dean is sent to the 1940s and has to work with Eliot Ness. Being a fan of the 1987 drama *The Untouchables*, Dean makes constant allusions to the movie, the characters and the actors in it.

Nowhere is this dialogue with popular culture more visible, however, than in "Changing Channels" (5x8). The now famous episode takes this strategy to the extreme, transporting Dean and Sam to 'TV land'. More specifically, they come across a trickster and become trapped inside some of the most recognizable TV shows. First,

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cultural product (Grossberg, 2006) and who engages in an excessive, obsessive even, behavior (Hills, 2002) is commonly used and accepted.

[22] Obvious targets are those that involve supernatural beings, from ghosts to aliens or vampires. It is common for the Winchesters to describe what they do in comparison or in contrast to what is presented in other TV shows and movies such as *The Ghost Whisperer*, *Medium*, *The X-Files* or *Twilight*. Above all, these references serve the purpose of showing the viewer that, on the contrary to what happens in the abovementioned shows and movies, what takes place in *Supernatural* is 'real'.

[23] "Frontierland" is also the name of one of the themed areas in Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, conceived to look like the old West.

[24] This episode clearly proves Dean's love for old movies, not only through the references to Clint Eastwood, whom Dean is obsessed about (apparently being able to recite every movie he ever made, line-for-line), but also to the clothes he chooses to wear. Dean gets inspiration for his wardrobe from the many cowboy movies he has seen; yet, when he is taken back to the old West, he quickly realizes that his references are completely wrong and inadequate.

Supernatural is turned into a sitcom, adopting bright colors, audience in the studio laughing, and even a cheesy theme song:

> Town to town, two-lane roads
> Family biz, two hunting bros
> Living the lie, just to get by
> As long as we're movin' forward
> There's nothing we can't do
> Together we'll face the day
> You and I won't run away
> When the demons come out to play
> Together we'll face the day ("Changing Channels", 5x8)

After this trip over sitcoms and their conventions, Sam becomes KITT's voice from the *Knight Rider*. The brothers are also forced to play in a Japanese game show, known for its humiliating and even painful stunts and to participate in a *CSI*-like forensic cop show.[25] Finally, they integrate a medical drama show, *Dr. Sexy M.D.*, that parodies once timeslot competition *Grey's Anatomy*. Dean, a passionate TV consumer, guides his brother through all the characters and the underlying drama.[26]

Regarding the second point of strength of the show, its ability to joke with itself, the actors and the production staff, a few episodes stand out as relevant and clearly demonstrate this capacity to break the fourth wall. In "Hollywood Babylon" (2x18), Dean and Sam try to solve a mysterious death that takes place in Warner Bros' studios in Hollywood. In this episode, the characters make fun of a movie whose script was written by the show's creator, Eric Kripke; they joke about the strange weather in LA, referring to the fact that it looks almost Canadian (an inside joke about the fact that the show is actually shot in Canada); and they joke about Jared Padalecki's (Sam's) former acting role when they pass the place where *Gilmore Girls* was filmed. The tour serves indeed as an excuse to put in a few celebrity names and movie titles, as Dean shows himself completely enthralled by the whole experience.[27]

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[25] The reference to David Caruso's character in *CSI-Miami* (Horatio Caine) is both obvious and hilarious, with the brothers mimicking Caruso's mannerisms, one-liners and voice tone.

[26] This last parody has an added layer of humor and meaning. When Dean mentions the ghost in the hospital, it is a hint about Jeffrey Dean Morgan, the actor who played Dr. Izzie's lost love in *Grey's Anatomy* but also Dean and Sam's father in *Supernatural*.

[27] An example of this is when Dean claims to see Matt Damon:
"Dean: Sammy, check it out, it's Matt Damon!
Sam: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's not Matt Damon.
Dean: No, it is.
Sam: Well, Matt Damon just picked up a broom and started sweeping.
Dean: Yeah, well, he's probably researching a role or something" (2x18).

"Ghostfacers" (3x13) is another case in point. It was the first episode airing after the Writers Guild of America strike, which cut short some shows and even dictated the end of others. It was thought as a critique on the unscripted shows expected to run in the place of scripted dramas if the strike had not ended. The episode recaptures two characters from season 1 that played ghost hunters-wannabes, Ed Zeddmore and Harry Spangler, who are now shooting the pilot for their new reality TV show called *Ghostfacers*. Filmed using a hand-held camera style, reminiscent of the *Blair Witch Project*, "Ghostfacers" is presented as the future of reality TV.

Finally, "The French Mistake" (6x15) is probably the greatest example in which reality intertwines with fiction. In this episode, the brothers are sent to a parallel universe in which they are Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, actors playing the roles of Dean and Sam in a TV series called *Supernatural*. In this episode, self-awareness and self-mockery are taken to the limit, with jokes on the show's creators, the crew behind the cameras as well as on the actors themselves. It exaggerates reality and conveys amplified versions of the cast and crew's personality, as is evident in Misha Collins's case, the actor who plays the angel Castiel, who is depicted as a tweet-addict that refers to his followers as "mishamigos"; or Eric Kripke, who is presented as someone who is only interested in ratings and profit and is killed in the end; or even Ackles and Padalecki, who are portrayed as rich and vain actors that barely stand each other.[28] Moreover, this episode also allows making fun of all pre-conceived ideas associated to acting. One of its funniest moments takes place exactly when Dean and Sam try to act as Ackles and Padalecki acting as Dean and Sam and their efforts completely backfire.

Finally, regarding the close relationship between the show and the fans, it can be said that *Supernatural*'s longevity owes enormously to its loyal fan base. Considering the show's modest ratings in comparison to its direct competitors or other shows that target a similar audience, and the fact that a great portion of TV viewers barely know of its existence, lasting 10 years might seem unbelievable. However, to those more acquainted with the series, this does not come as a surprise. *Supernatural*'s success, as many have noticed (especially the CW, which keeps backing up the show), cannot be measured by conventional metrics that do not take into account the convergence between television and other media, namely the Internet.

Contemporary TV audience is not a passive agent anymore; on the contrary, spectatorship is now an active action that has developed into what Henry Jenkins has

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[28] It is noteworthy as well the jokes around Ackles's former role in soap opera *Days of Our Lives* or Padalecki's marriage to the actress who played the demon Ruby in season 4.

called a 'participatory culture', where the media industry and producers follow a logic of engagement that nurtures a constant interplay between show and fans.[29] The emergence of "post-broadcast television", "characterized by interactivity, customization, multiple platforms and non-broadcast screen entertainment carried via video, cable, streaming, or archive systems such as TiVo" (Hartley, 2003: xiv-xv), has altered how the audience interacts with their favorite TV programs, with fans making use of new media to expand their visibility and influence. As a result, they are not only media consumers anymore but also media users, critics, and producers. This interaction between audience and television varies from a critical response to the show to appropriation and recirculation of the show's contents (e.g. social networks, blogs, wikis, etc.), or even creative expression (i.e. fan fiction, stories written by fans either adding to the original story or rearranging it and creating a different one). Yet, one other interaction besides that between show and fans is also extremely important: that of fans with other fans. TV consumption has evolved from a somewhat individual action (even though viewers could be brought together under the umbrella term of 'fan') into a collective, or communal, process, still difficult to understand and explain.

Most of *Supernatural*'s success lies not in the quantity of its fans but in the strong and extremely active and dedicated community of fans that religiously watch the show, participate in conventions, buy merchandise, follow the actors, and, eventually, take over the Internet with their comments, fan pages, fan fiction, etc. It is not difficult to find references about *Supernatural* fans being amongst the most active, devoted, and vocal. This is hinted by Neda Ulaby, who discusses the show in "The Few, the Fervent: Fans of *Supernatural* Redefine Success":

> Unlike a massively popular scripted TV show like *The Big Bang Theory* or *The Walking Dead,* it has only about 3 million viewers. Its Nielsen ratings are, frankly, not that great. Yet *Supernatural* has lasted for nine seasons (so far), partly because its fan base makes up in engagement what it lacks in size. *Supernatural* has almost as many 'likes' on Facebook as *NCIS*, a show with an audience six times larger (Ulaby, 2014).

As the data Ulaby has gathered demonstrates, fans have had a tangible role in the show's success, convincing both the network and the producers to continuously renew it. Recognizing their support and importance, the authors of *Supernatural* have tried to incorporate fandom into the show. The decision to create episodes where this

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[29] Cf. the extensive work by Henry Jenkins in this field (Jenkins, 2006a; 2006b; 2013; Jenkins et al., 2009).

importance is acknowledged and fans take a primary role brings not only visibility to the audience – and a face to those who are always on the other side of the screen (and who usually only have a written voice, namely in the web) – but it also brings visibility to the series itself, cementing its place as a cult TV show.[30]

The first example is "The Monster at the End of this Book" (4x18). This episode is both self-referential and a tribute to the fans. Very briefly, the Winchesters come across a series of books about their lives called *Supernatural*, written by Chuck Shurley under the pseudonym Carver Edlund – the juxtaposition of the names of two writers of *Supernatural*, the TV series. This episode particularly jokes with the creators of the show. Chuck, in the presence of the characters, seems shocked with everything he put them through, especially bad writing, aligning himself with Kripke's real opinion about two specific episodes he considered weak script-wise (i.e. "Bugs", 1x08; and "Red Sky at Morning", 3x06). Yet, additionally, the brothers also find out about a loyal but critical online fandom that is divided into Dean fans, Sam fans and slash fans – as in Dean and Sam together – which completely horrifies them. Bringing fans into play therefore calls attention to the underground success of the series, which has built a large fan base especially over the Internet.[31]

Fans take a central role again in "The Real Ghostbusters" (5x9). The leading characters are tricked by their self-entitled number one fan Becky to attend a *Supernatural* convention and try to solve a fictitious ghost hunt that eventually turns into a real one. In this episode, the brothers meet *Supernatural*'s super fans that show

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[30] There is no consensus regarding a definitive definition of cult TV, being perceived as an elastic concept that can both refer to classic and contemporary works (Le Guern, 2004: 3). Following Umberto Eco's often quoted definition of the cult object (Eco, 1986: 198), Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson define cult TV as that which is "considered offbeat or edgy, that draws a niche audience, that has a nostalgic appeal, that is considered emblematic of a particular subculture, or that is considered hip" (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 2004: ix). Most scholars put the emphasis on the reception end, indicating fans as the determining element of cult TV. It has been agreed upon that cult shows do not usually garner as wider an audience as mainstream shows; but, instead, give birth to tight, extremely committed and, at times, borderline excessive communities of fans. As Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson put it, they "[cater] to intense, interpretative audience practices (...) which include the formation of loose interpretative communities and the production of tertiary texts" (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 2004: xvi). The nature of cult TV has changed over the years – having been intrinsically connected up until recently to the fantasy genre – but what has changed the most is how it is perceived and understood. Cult TV, traditionally viewed as the realm of outcasts and 'geeks', has become a very attractive and profitable market, with networks trying to bring together the large numbers associated with mainstream TV and the dedication that cult TV usually involves (Abbott, 2010: 1).

[31] The Internet has changed and enhanced fan involvement, taking engagement practices away from a "powerless elite" (Tulloch, 1995) and allowing millions of people to interact with both the shows that matter to them and other people that share their ideas and feelings. Internet functions, indeed, as a meeting ground for viewers and promotes communication amongst them (Felschow, 2010). Producers and networks have used these online communities in their favor so as to heighten the buzz around their shows; yet, when the latter start making demands, they tend to be shut down. *Supernatural* seems to have become a paradigmatic example of the importance of this growing aspect of modern spectatorship, with the Internet functioning as a second home for the show and its primary motor for success. Cf. Zubernis and Larsen (2014).

up in costumes resembling iconic creatures of the show or fans that dress up and act like them. Indeed, even though the episode is meant to lovingly make fun of the level of worship the series has gathered, it also mocks the series itself, especially the main characters, as the role-playing fans try to reproduce the Winchesters' styles, voices and even their catchphrases or punch lines.

In the most recent season, fans, and more specifically fan fiction, take once again center stage, this time literally, in "Fan Fiction" (10x05), which celebrates the 200th episode of the series. When they investigate a new case involving a missing teacher, Dean and Sam find themselves barging into an all-girl school play about *Supernatural*. And not just any play, a musical.[32] This meta episode, which is also an ode to the fans who have supported the show and guaranteed its continuity, is full of references to them and the passionate way they have claimed the show and the characters for themselves.[33] Moreover, it marks a hiatus within the main storyline to focus on its audience and the aspects that appealed to them in the first place. While the musical retells the story of *Supernatural*, forcing both viewers and characters down memory lane, the story of the episode goes back to the show's very roots and the premise of a monster or unsolved mystery per week.

The references to popular culture and to the show itself therefore both present and foster a sense of awareness. It confirms that the authors of the show are cognizant

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[32] This infuriates Dean, who insists that there is no music in *Supernatural*:
"Dean: There is no singing in *Supernatural*!
Maeve (stage manager): Well, this is Marie's interpretation…
Dean: Well… I mean, if there was singing, you know… And that's a big if! If there was singing, it would be classic rock. Not this Andrew Floyd Webber crap.
Sam: Andrew Lloyd Webber.
Dean: What?
Marie (writer/director): Well, you know, we do sing a cover of *Carry On My Wayward Son*, in the second act.
Sam: Really?
Dean and Marie: It's a classic!" (10x05)
This scene is clearly a humoristic wink to *Supernatural* fans since Dean has been caught singing numerous times throughout the series.

[33] A symbolic scene is when Dean tries to explain the 'real' story of *Supernatural* to Marie and she laughs in his face saying that his version is the worst fan fiction she has ever heard. In the end, however, Dean changes his opinion about Marie's story, encouraging her (and all fans by extension) to keep writing: "I have my version, and you have yours" (10x05). Yet, even though *Supernatural*'s producers and fans usually maintain a somewhat healthy relationship, which finds echo in the show's continuity and in the many episodes where fandom becomes part of the plot, it is also true that producers tend to use these episodes to assert their power over the show as well. As Laura E. Felschow points out in relation to "The Monster at the End of this Book" (4x18), these fan-focused episodes follow a double agenda, thus bringing visibility to the aforementioned underlying tension between producers and fans. On the one hand, they recognize the significance of the fan for the success of a product; on the other, they are used to make a statement: "The acknowledgment of fan behavior within this episode is not an overt invitation to participate (…). The cult fan is reminded that s/he cannot decide what is to be included and excluded (…). By representing their fans in the manner *they* see fit within the canon of the program, *Supernatural* has wrested some control back to the side of production and left the fans to either accept it or not" (Felschow, 2010).

of today's reality: from socio-political concerns (by means of a plot that can be easily related to post-9/11 and the War on Terror) to everyday culture (in the shape of references to the entertainment industry, mass media, technological developments, etc. that are incorporated into the script). Then again, it also demonstrates that they know the cultural importance and impact of the series, which has taken advantage of new technologies and social media, gathered a large following and unfolded into other products (e.g. comic books and anime series) that reinforce its position in contemporary pop culture.

Carry On My Wayward Son

To conclude, this article focused on the intersection between *Supernatural* and popular culture. First, how the show has entered popular culture as part of a prevailing trend in literature, film and TV that tries to discuss and represent the post-9/11 period; second, how it communicates with popular culture, thus abandoning a closed-off position and adopting an interactive stance. Popular culture plays the crucial role of contextualizing a show that carries all the characteristics of a timeless and placeless story (that can nevertheless be easily situated).[34] We have the main storyline of good versus evil and the implicit allusion to the post-9/11 culture of fear and the War on Terror and we also have many specific moments where elements of today's (American) culture and society are brought into play, thus impelling the viewer to recognize the added subtext and establish meaningful connections with reality.

In my opinion, *Supernatural* is ruled by the principle that it cannot be separated from its cultural context. On the one hand, the havoc created by 9/11 finds correspondence in the larger plot of the series. *Supernatural*'s story featuring an enduring fight against evil reproduces the long-lasting effects of 9/11 and, unlike many of the post-apocalyptic dystopian works mentioned earlier whose stories take place after disaster, brings forth a sense of apocalypse unfolding. On the other hand, media convergence finds echo in the many references to everyday culture that bring together, for example, TV, cinema and the Internet. Said references are used in multiple ways but especially as devices to complement or develop the plot, set the mood and pace of the scenes and identify characters by comparison. Notwithstanding, they also help

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[34] References to a specific timeframe are very slim throughout the show (although they do exist and place it in the present time) and the Winchesters are portrayed as nomads with no fixed address, other than Bobby's (a family friend and a father figure to the brothers). Current situations, objects and individuals – alongside geographical markers – is what really provides further context.

broadening the show's audience. References to urban legends, classic movies and songs tell us about the brother's roots and their upbringing but they also ensure the support of a specific niche that is in tune with the horror genre and is interested in a more traditional approach; meanwhile, references to contemporary TV shows, movies and celebrities help us establish a bridge with the present and situate them here and now. They make it appealing to a younger and broader audience and, simultaneously, test their knowledge of movies or television formats in general, for instance.

In this sense, it can be stated that even though *Supernatural* features a very particular and fantasized world, it is nevertheless able to establish a permanent link with reality through intertextuality and metafiction. These strategies blur fiction and reality and momentarily transport the viewer to the world outside the story being depicted. They are key tools to support the storyline, either light up or darken the mood of the show, intensify the bond with spectators and, above all, assert the show's contemporariness, both in the sense of placing the story in the present and in proving the show's cultural relevance today.

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