ANGELS, DEMONS AND WHATEVER COMES NEXT: THE STORYWORLD DYNAMICS OF *SUPERNATURAL*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the narrative dynamics of the fantasy television series *Supernatural* (2005-) in order to better understand how this particular program has become a backbone of The CW network. Combining formal and contextual narratologies, it blends a close-reading of the series with an analysis of its writing, production and reception contexts, and divides the long-running series into four eras, each defined by a specific showrunner. It starts by exploring the context of the series' creation, before cataloguing the shifting dynamics of the storyworld during the four eras: the 'stealth teleological' approach of series creator Eric Kripke; the complex reconfigurations of the Sera Gamble era; the 'mythology reboot' of the Jeremy Carver era; and the ever-increasing stakes and expansionist dynamics of the Andrew Dabb era. The aim of this paper is to show how 'periodising' a long-running series by using close-reading and studying the dynamics of a storyworld can expand and complete analysis focused on audiences and the genesis of the text.

The Apocalypse has just been averted. The Winchester brothers, Sam and Dean, hunters of monsters and demons, thwarted Lucifer's plans and put him back in his cage in the deepest levels of Hell, at the cost of Sam's life, imprisoned with him. Chuck Shurley – God in disguise – is narrating the events while writing on his computer: "No doubt, endings are hard. But then again... nothing ever really ends, does it?" He smiles before disappearing into thin air. Later, unbeknownst to Dean, Sam is back from Hell, watching his brother from afar.

The last scenes from "Swan Song" (5.22) encapsulate urban fantasy TV series *Supernatural* (2005-), from a storyworld point of view as well as a real-world point of view: this is not the first time, nor the last, that one of the brothers dies and comes back to life. The end of season five, and the disappearance of writer Chuck Shurley, also echoes the departure of series creator and showrunner Eric Kripke. Since that first Apocalypse, the series has garnered a loyal fandom and, after thirteen seasons and four showrunners, shows no signs of wear. Along with *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), *Criminal Minds* (2005-) or *NCIS* (2003-), this is one of the few scripted prime-time television series of the mid-2000s still on the air. It is a relic from another time, before the rise of SVoD content producers, when networks and cable channels alike aimed for niche markets and an increasing narrative complexity, which "redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (Mittell 2015: 18). Any series reaching more than ten seasons may begin to look like a Ship of Theseus, rebuilt over and over again to renew interest: *Supernatural* is particularly interesting in that the only original 'nail and plank' of the ship are the Winchester brothers, around whom the whole storyworld recombines itself season after season.

This paper will explore the narrative dynamics of *Supernatural* in an attempt to better understand its longevity, and the way it reinvents itself writing-wise. Combining formal and contextual narratologies (see Shen 2005), I will blend a close-reading of the series with an analysis of its writing, production and reception contexts, using Thomas Pavel's (1988) and Lubomír Doležel's (1998) works on possible worlds theory applied to fiction, along with what Marie-Laure Ryan would call *storyology,* "the study of the logic that binds events into plots" (2009: 73), and finally, Raphaël Baroni's research on narrative tension (2007). I will also draw from my own work on long-term serialized narration on television (Favard 2014, 2015, 2016a) – this paper being part of an ongoing research on the shape, structure and dynamics of narratively complex television series' sto-

ryworlds and plots (Favard 2016b, 2017). In the following pages, the term "storyworld" will be used to underline the fact that "interpreters attempt to reconstruct not just what happened [...] but also the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved" (Herman 2002: 13-14).

From a methodological point of view, I acknowledge my status as a scholar-fan (Hills 2002), and the down-to-earth philosophy of storyology, which Ryan reminds us is "mostly [produced by] scriptwriters and authors of 'How to' manuals", although she cites Thomas Pavel, Vladimir Propp, Claude Bremond or Emma Kafalenos as examples of academic 'storyologists'. This paper will then deal with, on the one hand, the complex balance between "the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject" and personal investment in the series (Hills 2002: xxvii), between "the need to understand [the text] more fully" and "a sustained and committed investigation" (Cardwell 2006: 74); and, on the other hand, the need to face evaluation rather than trying to avoid it, while keeping in mind that, in television studies, "scholarly arguments are not statements of fact, but rather assertions to be discussed and debated" (Mittell 2009: 123). *Supernatural* will not be evaluated in absolute and definitive terms in the following pages; the arguments presented are open to debate and will bring more questions than answers.

The 'showrunner eras' dividing the series into four segments are inspired by Paul Booth's work about periodising long-running science fiction series *Doctor Who* (1963-1989; 2005-) (see Booth 2014). Those eras are also used by the fandom, for example on the collaborative encyclopedia website *Supernatural Wikia*[1]. This website has been a useful source during the writing of this paper and will be called upon from time to time, as wikis are an integral part of "participatory fandom" (Mittell 2012). Even one scholar-fan is no match for a fandom's "collective intelligence" (Jenkins 2008: 4), especially since the "fictional encyclopedia" (Doležel 1998: 177-81) of the show has become increasingly complex over the years.

I will proceed chronologically, beginning with the 'stealth teleological' approach of series creator Eric Kripke, followed by the complex reconfigurations of the Sera Gamble era; I will then analyze the 'mythology reboot' of the Carver era, and finally the ever-increasing stakes and expansionist dynamics of the Dabb era.

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1   Available online at http://supernatural.wikia.com.

1. "… AND THEY HAVE A PLAN": ERIC KRIPKE AND THE *CLOSURE PLEDGE* TREND

Initially aired on The WB, *Supernatural* foregrounded the 'procedural drama' aspects of *Buffy* (1997-2003) and *Charmed* (1998-2006): firmly grounded in the real world and their era rather than in the mystical world, the three series center their formula on the investigation that needs to be conducted prior to fighting evil. The high school library of *Buffy* and the Book of Shadows in *Charmed* are clearly echoed in the way the Winchester brothers – especially Sam – have to 'hit the books' and 'check the lore' when working on cases; the fact that they usually impersonate federal agents emphasizes this procedural aspect, which can be traced back at least to *The X-Files* (1993-2002).

Supernatural therefore clearly behaves as an episodic procedural drama during its first seasons, with the only serialized aspects being the goals the brothers set themselves: finding their father John in season one, killing the demon Azazel in season two. These goals are macro-questions that call for closure (Carroll 2007). In the context of television series, I call them *iterative macro-questions* (Favard 2015), as they typically ask a yes or no question that can be called upon by any number of episodes without giving an answer. Yet they sustain a narrative tension (Baroni 2007) beyond the scale of the episodes themselves: will the brothers find John? Will they kill Azazel? Iterative macro-questions have been the standard of even the most episodic television series since the 1960s, and the ever-delayed conclusion of *The Fugitive* (1963-1967): will Richard Kimble find the one-armed man? Those questions are also of a *biographical* nature rather than a *cosmographical* one, as they deal with family and revenge: such questions are 'easier' to use as they only affect the network of characters rather than the entire storyworld. 'Easy' does not mean 'uncomplex'. In fact, as we will see, cosmographical questions are harder to use mainly because they can be a writer's nightmare: when answered, they can alter the structure of an entire fictional world. An example would be: will the Colonials ever find Earth in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009)? Answering the question positively would resolve the entire plot of the series, as the writers did only when the time came to end the series (Favard 2015).

This episodic trend, however, is slowly counterbalanced by serialized narrative threads, as it is in most narratively complex contemporary television series (Mittell 2015), such as J. J. Abrams' *Alias* (2001-2006), which struggled to find the balance between the episodic and the serialized

(see Örnebring 2007). Moreover, showrunner Eric Kripke repeatedly said he "had a plan", just like the evil Cylons do in *Battlestar Galactica*: early interviews already point towards a three- to five-year plan (2007). *Supernatural* may have been influenced by a 2000s trend that I call the *closure pledge*, embodied by shows such as *Battlestar* and *Lost* (2004-2010). The closure pledge consists in making explicit, in the first episodes, a macro-question that, if answered, would either collapse the entire plot on itself and end the series, or force the writers to 'reboot' the program and change some of its core elements: what would *Lost* be if all the characters had left the mysterious island at the end of the first season? At the same time, despite the "infinite model of storytelling" (Mittell 2010) driven by economics and a show's success, a model that will make said closure anything but *imminent*, a closure pledge television series will repeatedly stress the *immanence* of its denouement (Kermode 1967: chapter 1).

Supernatural is not a closure pledge series *per se*, but it may have been read like one because of Kripke's frequent references to his "plan". To this day, *Supernatural Wikia*, among other sources, still refers to the "five-year plan" when detailing the Kripke era, even suggesting that "the show was supposed to end at this point"[2]. The said 'plan' is not made explicit until the beginning of season four, when the macro-questions leading an increasingly serialized plot become more and more cosmographical: high-ranking demon Lilith plans to free Lucifer and bring on the Apocalypse, the end of the (story)world. Interestingly, everything the brothers went through during the first four seasons is then presented as a necessary sequence of events leading up to the Apocalypse: Azazel corrupted Sam *to prepare him* to be possessed by Lucifer, and the brothers were *predestined* to be vessels of the archangels Lucifer and Michael for their final battle. Just like *Lost* and other highly serialized television series, *Supernatural* transforms *contingency* into *necessity* (see Peck 2011: 78), emphasizing "regressive causality", driven by structuralist analysis of 'closed' forms of narration such as a novel, over the "principle of prospective economy" used by most progressive, ongoing, open forms of narration (see Escola 2010). Did Kripke really have a plan? He himself confesses that he and the writers had to compromise: "Some things were accelerated and other stories took longer to tell than I thought, but overall, we're on track" (2007). I have shown elsewhere that this type of discourse is common nowadays: while it is first

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2   See « The Kripke era », available online at http://supernatural.wikia.com/wiki/The_Kripke_Era.

and foremost reinforcing the writers' ethos – "the author's image built through metadiscourse" (Amossy 2009, my translation) – and their importance in the production process of television series, these plans may at least offer a guideline for the writing room (Favard 2015).

Whether Kripke did plan the entire first five seasons or not is another matter; most probably, the writer aimed at five seasons to pass the syndication threshold and ensure the show's continuation from an economic standpoint. What interests me here is that Kripke succeeded in telling a five-year story that does offer, in "Swan Song" (5.22), that "point of view from which the story can be seen as a whole" (Ricœur 1983: 130, my translation), emphasizing the difference between story (the order of events) and plot (the causal links between events). A seemingly episodic television series became what writer Damon Lindelof would call a "stealth serialized" show (Bennett 2014: 79), underlining its serialized storyline as it was answering its most important, cosmographical, teleological macro-question: will the Apocalypse, planned by angels and demon alike for eons, be averted? The answer was yes. Kripke, feeling the show was "reaching the end of this five-year storyline" (and emphasizing subsequent readings of the show in that fashion, including mine), decided to step down as a showrunner, and let another "open a new [chapter]" (Ausiello 2010). But as God says himself in the season five finale, "nothing ever really ends".

2. HOW TO KEEP GOING AFTER THE END: SERA GAMBLE'S RECONFIGURATION OF THE MODERN MYTH

An even greater challenge greeted Sera Gamble, promoted to showrunner before the beginning of season six: telling what happened after the Apocalypse was averted. Her two-season reign over the writing room is perhaps one of the most complicated eras of the show. She continued to profess the existence of an "over-arching storyline" (a required declaration for television writers nowadays), but stressed that

> We were very aware that we had gone as big and epic as we could go, so we didn't want to just slot in another big bad. We didn't want to deal with a new story in that way because it would feel like a cheat. I don't think you can go bigger than Lucifer and excite people (Radish 2010).

Beyond the need to avoid bringing in a new "big bad", as *Buffy* and *Charmed* did every season, I argue *Supernatural* was confronted with a specific situation inside its storyworld: the Apocalypse storyline allowed the realms of Heaven and Hell to collide with Earth. Over the first five seasons, the storyworld slowly "saturated", as it accumulated determinate facts surrounded by indeterminate, implicit facts (Doležel 1998: 182-3). It expanded the "circle of light" into the darkness that is the inherent incompleteness of all fictional worlds (Pavel 1988: 120). But this saturation led the storyworld to evolve from a classical, dyadic, mythical structure, into what Doležel calls the "modern myth". The realm of the supernatural and its omnipotent entities, once clearly separated from the world down below, became a hybrid, homogeneous world in which hierarchies between entities lost part of their meaning (Doležel 1998: 186-7). For example, Crowley, a low-ranking demon introduced in season five, suddenly becomes King of Hell in the ensuing seasons. Angels and demons alike emphasize a visual and thematic blend between realms already started as soon as season four: they are portrayed as everyday business men and women dressed in three-piece suits, while both Hell and Heaven are structured like the greedy corporations of our late capitalist era.

It is particularly interesting that the sixth season may be the only one without a single, clear, season-defining plot, emphasizing both Gamble's difficult task, and the confusion in the aftermath of the Apocalypse. The season is instead parsed with discrete mini-arcs, from Sam needing to recover his soul to the hunt for "Alpha monsters" and the quick rise and fall of Eve, a potential big bad who barely lasts from 6.12 to 6.19. The angel civil war over who gets to rule Heaven now that God has "left the building" is treated stealthily at first, before the conflict escalates between the angels and the demons over who will harness the power of the souls in Purgatory.

The Gamble era is peculiar in that, beyond adding Purgatory to the structure of the storyworld, it does not alter it significantly; the character network, however, is deeply affected by some bold decisions, such as the death of Bobby, a father figure for the brothers; Sam's instability following his time in Hell; as well as Castiel's temporary status as antagonist, when he is possessed by Leviathans, the main antagonists of season seven. Seasons six and seven are usually low in the rankings of the best seasons made by fans or entertainment websites. Audience-wise, they only confirm the slow decrease in viewers, averaging 2 million US viewers according to *TV by the numbers*. This slow decline is common

for long-running series, and one should note that after the Gamble era, the numbers held steady. It is not my place to evaluate Gamble's artistic choices; however, it is interesting to note that both the storyworld and the show itself went through uneasy reconfigurations after the Kripke era.

3. THE CARVER ERA: REBOOTING AN EXPANSIONIST MYTHOLOGY

When Jeremy Carver stepped in as showrunner, it is worth noting that many of his initial declarations seemed meant to reassure the fans about the 'mythology' of the show. As I have tried to show elsewhere (Favard 2018: 57), the term 'mythology', used by writers and fans alike, can be traced back to *The X-Files*, and usually refers to the macro-questions driving the serialized plot, but also to the dynamics of the storyworld and the characters' network. It should not be seen as a substitute for terms such as 'canon' or 'continuity', focused on already established, determinate facts – the 'mythology' looks both backward and forward, especially when it comes to the saturation of the storyworld and its evolving structure (Favard 2015, 2018). On the *Supernatural Wikia*, Jeremy Carver is presented as someone willing to restructure the mythology, with highlighted quotes underlining the work that needed to be done, reinforcing his ethos as the show's reformist. A quote from entertainment website *TVLine* is particularly explicit:

> The one thing that struck me [while] watching Season 7 was I felt like the show got a little bit buried under its mythology," he says of the year that found Dick Roman trying to start a Leviathan takeover of the human population. "It became a little hard to tell exactly what was going on at times. The longtime fans all deserve intricate plot, but it felt a little burdensome (Gelman, 2012).

The Carver era, composed of four seasons, is almost as long as the Kripke era, and brings back season-wide, clear-cut story arcs, and a slow expansion of the storyworld. Seasons eight to ten could be seen as setting up the increasingly expansionist dynamic of latter seasons; but in order to work, according to Carver, this expansion needed to begin with a "reset". Carver, as many showrunners do when they are handed a show they did not create, wanted to set the series in a new direction: his own. The Carver era is not a reboot *per se*: *Supernatural* is not rewritten from scratch, but its loose threads and intricacies are 'surgically' removed in order to give new momentum to clear-cut serialized arcs. Season eight is then centered on the brother's finding a way to close the gates of Hell, while in Heaven, the civil war concludes. The "reset" also takes the form of an ellipsis: after having been sent to Purgatory at the end of season seven, Dean Winchester comes back to Earth a year later, and the brothers have an uneasy reunion. During this year gap, they both lived a meaningful relationship outside of their brotherhood, and flashbacks detail Sam's romance with Amelia, and Dean's friendship with Benny, a vampire he met in Purgatory. It echoes *Alias* and *Battlestar Galactica*: both used this classic narrative device not to 'reboot' themselves, but to allow the characters and plot to move in new directions, discarding 'burdensome' intricacies.

Carver's "reset" of the storyworld is also manifested through a change in setting: following season seven's destruction of Bobby's headquarters, the brothers, in season eight, find out about the Men of Letters, a secret organization dedicated to fighting evil, with ties to their own family. The Men of Letters no longer being in activity, the brothers move into one of their bunkers, which is full of magical artifacts and books, and carry on their legacy. Compared to Bobby's, the Men of Letters' bunker is a setting full of promise and potential narrative leads; it also underlines the fact that the stakes are rising. Heaven and Hell, once impenetrable realms in a dyadic structure, are now fuel for endless conflicts; protagonist Castiel and antagonist Crowley allow the plot to visit, on a regular basis, what can no longer be considered a mystical part of the storyworld. Season nine sends all the angels into exile on Earth, while Dean temporarily becomes a demon: the alignment and nature of individual agents becomes more complex. This hybridization of the storyworld is completed by a wider array of relationships explored by the show in season ten: beyond the Winchester's brotherhood, a core element since season one, Crowley, the King of Hell, is slowly sucked into a domestic nightmare as his mother, the powerful witch Rowena, saps his authority in Hell; meanwhile, Castiel is looking after Claire Novak, the daughter of the man he uses as his 'vessel' to walk the Earth.

If the Carver era is a "reset", it is a careful one, marked by power conflicts and an expanding set of core protagonists: the promotional material, limited to the brothers in early seasons, now counts Castiel and Crowley as an integral part of the show. The storyworld itself, though hybridized, remains steady. It is mainly through a potential spin-off series that

Supernatural tries to renew its approach of space and stakes. "Bloodlines" (9.20) centers on a police academy trainee, hunting demons in Chicago, offering a different dynamic by focusing on one city (while the Winchesters travel on the roads across the United States) and conflicts between powerful families of monsters (as opposed to the epic clashes between Earth, Heaven and Hell). *Bloodlines* was not picked up by The CW for the subsequent season.

The eleventh season, the last of the Carver era, sees the seasons' big bads making their return, reinvigorating a dynamic the series had not picked up since the Kripke era. The Darkness, a formidable foe older than God himself, is released at the end of season ten. *Supernatural* renews ties with its WB predecessors, *Charmed* and *Buffy*, in this storytelling tradition of the season's overarching antagonist – but with a twist. While the Kripke era used suspense as well as curiosity to drive the plot, allowing the audience to make prognoses about what is going to happen (will Lucifer be set free?) as well as diagnoses about what already happened (why did Azazel need Sam?), the Carver era's narrative tension is pure suspense, a continuous rush forward, with surprises along the way when the consequences of the brother's actions are unexpected (Baroni 2007). In the era of increased narrative complexity, each antagonist is a consequence of the former being destroyed, tying the seasons in a causal chain. The series slowly fosters a new "intrinsic norm", playing with the audience's "operational knowledge" (Mittell 2015: 167): whatever the brothers do to get rid of the big bad, they are setting the necessary conditions for the arrival of the next one.

This configuration is indeed quite common nowadays in narratively complex television series and does not even require a 'plan': all the text needs to do is to present every new event as a clear consequence of the last one, insisting on *plot* rather than on *story*. *Supernatural* is making no closure pledge, but its overarching plot goes beyond the scale of the seasons to pledge something like 'ever-increasing stakes'. Fantasy series of the 1990s and 2000s did try such retroactive plotting: for example, *Buffy* presents the emergence of The First, the 'big bad' of season seven, as a direct consequence of Buffy's resurrection in season six, an event that upset the balance between good and evil. But *Supernatural*, like many contemporary series, makes this retroactive plotting an integral part of its long-term storytelling dynamic. This continuous rush forward, however, risks turning the storyworld into a maelstrom of repetitive conflicts; to renew interest, it needs space to expand in unpredictable ways.

4. THE DABB ERA: BRINGING BACK THE DYADIC STORYWORLD THROUGH EXPANSION AND REVISION

Andrew Dabb, promoted to showrunner before season twelve, follows Carver's steps with a twofold expansion of the storyworld, acting both on the periphery of the world to seek new territories, as well as on the inside, through the "implicit texture" of the storyworld, an area rich with "plastic indeterminate facts" (Doležel 1998: 183). As the British Men of Letters try to aggressively take over the operations of the United States branch, Lucifer is jumping from vessel to vessel, just long enough to conceive a Nephilim – a human-archangel hybrid. Meanwhile, the network of characters is again disrupted with the resurrection of Mary Winchester, the brother's mother. Season twelve is all about redefining the show one more time by going back to its roots, bringing back actor Mark Pellegrino, a fan favorite, as Lucifer, and seemingly restarting the Apocalypse... to subvert it once again.

It is too soon to look back on the Dabb era as it only consists of three seasons, but a clear dynamic may already be at work. At the end of season twelve, Jack, the son of Lucifer, opens up a rift to an alternate reality where the Apocalypse did happen, shifting the storyworld from a "classical cosmology" to a "plural cosmology" (Ryan 2010: 66). This allows the text to explore another possible road not taken by the overarching plot in season five. This highly reflexive shift is coherent in a show that already displays a rich intratextuality and frequently breaks the fourth wall (Macklem 2014). Season thirteen plays with this alternate reality and other, briefly explored universes, coding those spaces as near-impenetrable and full of unknown and powerful entities – including a giant Godzilla-like monster – thereby reinstating a dyadic structure in a profoundly altered storyworld. But the Apocalypse alternate reality stands apart from the others, as it gives a detailed and counterfactual account of how the Kripke era of the show could have turned out if Lucifer had won. The character of Bobby is still alive in this universe, and this father figure is reintroduced into the 'main' universe, reconstructing, along with the resurrection of Mary Winchester, an extended family around the brothers. While not technically a form of retroactive continuity (the 'real' Bobby did die), alternate realities allow Dabb to potentially revise any decision made by his predecessors, thanks to the storyworld now being "plural". Through expansion into parallel universes, the Dabb era is not only returning to a dyadic configuration, but also using a form of palimpsestic revision

of the text, while playing with the fan's encyclopedic knowledge of the show.

Season thirteen is also going back in time another way. If the Carver era introduced the Darkness, born before God, the Dabb era went further and confronted Castiel to the Empty, the nothingness before all creation ("The Big Empty", 13.4). The Empty has yet to appear again. If we are to follow the series' intrinsic norms, however, the fact that Castiel is the only one able to escape the Empty means it is likely being set up as a future 'big bad'. Unless, that is, we are to see the emergence of a new dynamic within the storyworld.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I tried to underline the shifting dynamics of the long-running series *Supernatural*, in order to explain, at least in part, how it became one of The CW's signature programs. The 'stealth teleological' approach of series creator Eric Kripke gave the show internal coherence in its first seasons and illustrates how it may have been influenced by the closure pledge trend. Reception and author's discourse cannot encapsulate on their own the complexity of the Gamble era; I hope I have shown how a formal approach to the storyworld can add to the analysis of redefining moments in a television series. While the Carver era illustrates how a show's mythology can be partially 'rebooted' – in fact, given a new direction – the Dabb era is interesting because it reverts the entropic shift from a dyadic configuration to a hybrid one in many fantasy series. It remains to be seen how long *Supernatural* will last. But like other long-running television programs, the time may have come to undertake a 'periodisation' of the series, in Booth's terms, to better understand it from a storytelling point of view, beyond production and reception.

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